

# THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE CHURCH

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*The relationship between the church and the Kingdom of God has a long and complex history, with significant implications for gospel ministry. This article explores how best to describe that relationship in light of Scripture, and highlights a number of dangers with a wrong understanding.*

## Introduction: Can the Kingdom of God Be Identified with the Church?

### In Favour of Yes

Can the Kingdom of God be identified with the church?<sup>1</sup> If it can, then there are important implications not only for ecclesiology and church government, but also for evangelism and worship.

The answer to this question has often been ‘yes,’ at least since the time of Augustine.<sup>2</sup> This identification has been especially strong within Roman Catholicism, whether the ‘Church’ is understood in the traditional sense as the ordered Roman hierarchy, or in the modern sense as the people of God.<sup>3</sup>

According to *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

*The Church is the seed and beginning of the Kingdom...The Church is ultimately one, holy, catholic and apostolic in her deepest and ultimate identity, because it is in her that ‘the Kingdom of Heaven’ and ‘the Reign of God,’ already exists, and will be fulfilled at the end of time.*<sup>4</sup>

Another sort of identification is found within the so-called ‘Reformed Two Kingdoms Theology.’ David VanDrunen says that:

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I have not tried to distinguish too strictly between the different senses in which the word ‘church’ may be used. I intend primarily the church catholic and visible; but what I say would apply equally to the church as it is invisible and local.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *The City of God* (London: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 914–915; Augustine *The Trinity* (New York: New City, 1991), pp. 79, 81. See Ralph Cunnington ‘The Use of the Parables of the Weeds and the Dragnet in the Development of Reformed Ecclesiology,’ *Churchman* 126/4 (2012), pp. 324–325.

<sup>3</sup> See Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), pp. 741–742, 834. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1949), pp. 559–560.

<sup>4</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), pp. 128, 865.

the church is the only earthly institution that can identify itself with the redemptive kingdom. To have fellowship with the church is to have fellowship with the kingdom of heaven that Jesus proclaimed...The church ought to be central to the Christian life because the church is the only earthly community that manifests the redemptive kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

Peter Leithart agrees with Van Drunen that ‘the social dimension of the kingdom—its chief visible, earthly, communal manifestation—is the church.’<sup>6</sup>

### In Favour of No

From within the confessional Reformed tradition, Herman Bavinck denied that the word ‘church’ could be replaced by ‘kingdom of God,’ and drew a dichotomy between a kingdom consisting of ‘spiritual benefits,’ which is never organised on earth, and a ‘fellowship of persons.’<sup>7</sup> Evangelical scholarship has also, at least in recent decades, more commonly answered ‘no.’ As an example of this, we will take George E. Ladd, and his *A Theology of the New Testament*.<sup>8</sup> His view of the relationship between Kingdom and church has been very influential, and has been adopted by Wayne Grudem, among others.<sup>9</sup>

Ladd makes a very strict distinction between the Kingdom of God and the church: according to him, the two are inseparably related, but not to be identified in any way. The Kingdom is ‘never to be identified with the church...In biblical idiom, the Kingdom is not identified with its subjects.’<sup>10</sup> According to Ladd, Jesus did not come to start a new movement, but to offer the ‘age of fulfillment’ to the Jews, and the disciples were the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of a faithful

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<sup>5</sup> David VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010), p.133. However, Michael Horton, usually seen as a ‘Two Kingdoms’ theologian, criticises a simple equation of Church and Kingdom—see *The Christian Faith*, pp. 829, 834.

<sup>6</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *The Kingdom and the Power: recovering the Centrality of the Church* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1993), p.xii.

<sup>7</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics. Volume 4: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), pp.297–298.

<sup>8</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Guildford; London: Lutterworth, 1975). A later edition, revised by D.A. Hagner, was published in 1993, but the content referenced here remains substantially the same.

<sup>9</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: IVP/ Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 863–864.

<sup>10</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 111.

remnant of rebellious Israel, ‘the people of the Kingdom, the true Israel.’<sup>11</sup> Within this context, he believes that Jesus’ use of *ekklesia* refers to ‘the Old Testament concept of Israel as the people of God,’ and to neither an ‘organization or institution, nor any distinctively Christian concept such as the body or bride of Christ.’<sup>12</sup>

Ladd outlines the relationship between the Kingdom and the church in five points. The first is that ‘the Church is not the Kingdom.’ He appeals to the apostolic preaching, which proclaimed the Kingdom, not the church, and to the fact that the Gospels never ‘equate’ Jesus’ disciples and the Kingdom. Ladd’s conclusion is that ‘The church is the people of the Kingdom, never that kingdom itself. Therefore it is not helpful even to say that the church is a “part of the Kingdom.”’<sup>13</sup>

Ladd’s other points show the ‘inseparable connection’ between church and Kingdom. The second is that ‘the Kingdom creates the church,’ as God’s dynamic rule brings people into fellowship.<sup>14</sup> The third is that ‘the church witnesses to the Kingdom,’ but does not build it or become it. Fourth ‘the church is the instrument of the Kingdom,’ and fifth the church is the ‘custodian of the Kingdom,’ having been granted the keys, the authority to admit to or prohibit from the Kingdom through the proclamation of the gospel.<sup>15</sup>

Ladd summarises his conclusions thus:

...while there is an inseparable relationship between the Kingdom and the church, they are not to be identified. The Kingdom takes its point of departure from God, the church from men ...There can be no Kingdom without a church—those who have acknowledged God’s rule—and there can be no church without God’s Kingdom; but they remain two distinguishable concepts: the rule of God and the fellowship of men.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, whilst Ladd does say that Kingdom and church are inseparably related and connected, effectively he separates them by making a strict conceptual distinction between them.

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<sup>11</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 106–108.

<sup>12</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 109.

<sup>13</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 113.

<sup>14</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 113.

<sup>15</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 113–119.

<sup>16</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 119. See also Donald Guthrie *New Testament Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1981), pp. 702–703.

## Reasons for Dividing the Kingdom and the Church

### The Consequences of Conflating the Kingdom and the Church

One reason for refusing to identify Kingdom and church is the fear that such a move would lead to something like traditional Roman Catholic ecclesiology, and that the Kingdom would be subsumed into an authoritarian institutional structure, which would then become the sole channel of divine grace. This is a potent fear when set against the backdrop of the twentieth century's history of utopian and totalitarian regimes, in which the divine will was seen as immanent in an historical organisation or institution. So the liberal Roman Catholic theologian Hans Kung says that:

*...in all these false identifications the fact is overlooked that it is a question of the future, of God's kingdom. Neither the solidly institutionalized Church of medieval and Counter-Reformation Catholicism nor Calvin's Genevan theocracy was the kingdom of God; nor was it the apocalyptic kingdom of revolutionary, apocalyptic fanatics like Thomas Muntzer.*<sup>17</sup>

This fear is also perhaps fed by a general late-modern suspicion of the institutional, and the uncritical preference often shown for anything charismatic. The 'Two Kingdoms' identification of church and Kingdom has also been criticised for being too restrictive and church-centred, and as leading to 'social quietism,' as it tends not to see any manifestation of the Kingdom outside the church.<sup>18</sup>

### The Dynamic Nature of the Kingdom

Ladd starts from a dynamic understanding of the Kingdom, as do Geerhardus Vos, Hermann Ridderbos, Donald Guthrie, and Thomas Schreiner. That is, they hold that the Kingdom is not a territory or an institution, but God's active rule and dominion, issuing in his intervention in history. For Ladd, 'the Kingdom is primarily the dynamic reign or kingly rule of God,'<sup>19</sup> a definition endorsed by Schreiner.<sup>20</sup> For Ridderbos it is the 'kingly self-assertion of God...the display of the divine glory, the

<sup>17</sup> Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins, 1976), p.224. Italics original. Kung's description of Calvinian Geneva is a caricature.

<sup>18</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), pp.212–216.

<sup>19</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 111.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), p. 70.

reassertion and maintenance of God's rights on earth,<sup>21</sup> and for Guthrie 'the activity of reigning.'<sup>22</sup> Vos takes the 'abstract' meaning 'reign' or 'kingship' as his point of departure.<sup>23</sup> This is clearly what is meant by the Kingdom of God/Heaven in many passages, notably the announcements in Matthew 3:2, 4:17, Mark 1:15, and in Luke 11:20. Here the Kingdom is not an institution or a people, but the power and rule of God, the coming age breaking into the present. It is something that God does: in N.T. Wright's phrase, 'the Victory of God.'<sup>24</sup>

This dynamic concept maintains the theocentricity of the Kingdom; it prevents it from being identified with a society or institution that human beings can build for themselves, or with an existential experience.<sup>25</sup> It is the dynamic nature of the Kingdom that makes Ladd refuse to identify it with the church: 'If the dynamic concept of the Kingdom is correct, it is never to be identified with the church.'<sup>26</sup> Ridderbos too says that the *basileia* is the 'great divine work' and the *ekklesia* the consequent people, therefore they must not be identified.<sup>27</sup>

## The Difference between Identity and Equation

Here we must make a distinction between equating things and identifying them. If two things are equated, then they are the same. For instance, 'The Messiah' and 'Jesus of Nazareth' may be equated: the two terms refer to the same person. However, two things may also be identified without being equated. That is, they are closely linked and inseparably bound together, so that the interests of one are the interests of the other, but they are not the same thing. So for instance, a husband and wife identify with each other when they get married, but they are not equated with each other. To take another example, the risen Jesus is so identified with the church that he can say to Saul of Tarsus 'why are you persecuting *me*'?

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<sup>21</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1962), pp. 18, 20–21.

<sup>22</sup> Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, p. 409.

<sup>23</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* (New York: American Tract Society, 1903), p.27

<sup>24</sup> N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, p. 24. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 113. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, pp. 68–69.

<sup>26</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 113. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, p. 68.

<sup>27</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, pp. 354–355.

But, contrary to much Roman Catholic ecclesiology, Jesus is not to be equated with the church; they are not *totus Christus*.

A similar distinction is made in Reformed sacramental theology. In a Roman Catholic theology of the sacraments, the sign and the thing signified are equated: the bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ. In the Zwinglian theology of the sacraments common among evangelicals, the sign and the thing signified are separated: the bread and wine are visual reminders of the absent body and blood of Christ. But in a Reformed theology of the sacraments, the sign and the thing signified are neither equated nor separated, but identified (by means of the preached word, and their reception with faith). This meant that William Ames could talk of a ‘communication of predicates’ between them: what was predicated of one could be predicated of the other.<sup>28</sup>

The contention of this essay is that the relationship between church and Kingdom is much closer than Ladd allowed for: whilst they should not be equated, they should be identified. Ladd’s failure to make this distinction has led to an undue separation of the two.<sup>29</sup>

## Reasons for Identifying the Kingdom and the Church

### The Relationship between Kingdom and Church in Reformed Ecclesiology

In the past, some kind of identification of Kingdom and church was common in Reformed theology (with the notable exception, as we have seen, of Bavinck). For instance, Calvin speaks of forgiveness as ‘the first entry into the church and Kingdom of God’ and says that ‘the church is Christ’s Kingdom, and he reigns by his word alone.’<sup>30</sup> William Ames says that the church is called both the Kingdom of Christ and the Kingdom of God, citing Colossians 1:13 and Romans 14:17.<sup>31</sup> James Bannerman, in the classic work of Presbyterian ecclesiology, says that in Scripture the

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<sup>28</sup> William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), p.198. Another example of identity without equation might be the relationship between Yahweh and the Ark of the Covenant, notably in Joshua 3–4. Clearly they are not the same thing, otherwise the Ark would be an idol. But Yahweh does identify with the Ark in such a way that it can stand proxy for his own presence, and be the vehicle of it. So when the Ark goes into the Jordan, this is more than just a dramatic visual aid: Yahweh himself is entering the river ahead of his people.

<sup>29</sup> Ralph Cunnington also seems to treat ‘equate’ and ‘identify’ as synonymous. Cf. ‘The Use of the Parables,’ pp. 323, 337

<sup>30</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), pp.1034, 1046.

<sup>31</sup> Ames, *Marrow*, p. 176.

church is ‘represented in the very peculiar light of a visible kingdom, of which Christ is the living Head or King.’<sup>32</sup> The Westminster Confession 25.2 states that ‘the visible church...is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.’ The strength of this tradition can be seen in the standard interpretation of the Parables of the Weeds and of the Net in Matthew 13:24–50. Following Augustine and Calvin, most Reformed writers understood the ‘field’ and the ‘net’ to be the church. This interpretation was almost certainly mistaken;<sup>33</sup> but it only came about because there was a prior tradition that identified church and Kingdom.<sup>34</sup> Just because the interpretation was wrong, this does not mean that the tradition that caused it was wrong.<sup>35</sup> Whilst an argument from tradition alone is not conclusive, it should at least give us pause before we accept the current consensus without qualification.

### The Consequences of Dividing Kingdom and Church.

If the consequences of equating church and Kingdom are undesirable, then so are the consequences of making too sharp a distinction between them. Ladd leaves at least two areas ambiguous. First, given the disjunction he has made between Jesus’ language of *ekklesia*, and the Pauline language of ‘body’ and ‘bride,’ it is not clear if he thinks that the foundation of the church was an essential part of Jesus’ purpose. Second, whilst he does say that ‘there can be no Kingdom without a church’ (N.B., not ‘*the*’ church), given that he does not see the church as intrinsic to the very concept of the Kingdom, it is not clear if the church is any more than an inevitable epiphenomenon of the Kingdom.

In sharply distinguishing church and Kingdom, Ladd writes that ‘the Kingdom takes its point of departure from God, the church from men...they remain two distinguishable concepts: the rule of God and the

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<sup>32</sup> James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1868), Volume 2, p. 208.

<sup>33</sup> Ralph Cunnington, ‘The Use of the Parables,’ pp. 331–337.

<sup>34</sup> Ralph Cunnington, ‘The Use of the Parables,’ p. 337.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew 13:47 is one of the proof texts in the Westminster Confession 25.2, for calling the church the kingdom. However, this should not be taken to mean that the traditional view was based on this text. The Westminster Assembly only added the proof texts reluctantly, and at the urging of Parliament, as pointers to a wider biblical context. See Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), pp.107, 137. As we will see, the identification of Church and Kingdom does not depend upon Matthew 13.

fellowship of men.<sup>36</sup> For Ladd, it would seem that the church is primarily a voluntary association of believers, brought into being by the preaching of the Kingdom. A voluntarist conception of the church is consonant with an Independent ecclesiology.<sup>37</sup> Separating church and Kingdom may have led to a quasi-congregationalist ecclesiology and a low view of the church (as a human, not a divine, institution) amongst some evangelicals.

### **The Nature of the Kingdom: Dynamic and Stative.**

As we have seen, Ladd, Ridderbos, and Vos all begin from a dynamic understanding of the Kingdom. However, for both Ridderbos and Vos, the Kingdom is not merely dynamic. For Ridderbos the ‘dynamic viewpoint should not be absolutized’ because the Kingdom is consummated as a ‘state of peace and happiness.’<sup>38</sup> Vos goes farther, and says that Jesus enlarged the meaning of ‘Kingdom’ to embrace ‘a realm, a state of life, a state of things...a complex of divine blessings.’<sup>39</sup> This accounts for the numerous passages that talk of ‘entering,’ being ‘cast out’ of, ‘seeking,’ and ‘receiving’ the Kingdom: it is hard to make sense of these if the Kingdom is merely dynamic.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, without this stative aspect, it might be hard to explain why the coming of the Kingdom is good news.

Thus the church can be identified with the Kingdom in its stative aspect, without the latter losing its theocentricity. Because Vos has a wider concept of the Kingdom, he can identify the Kingdom and the church without reducing the former to the latter. He writes: ‘It must be possible...to call the church the kingdom. It is another question...whether the kingdom can under all circumstances be identified with the church.’<sup>41</sup> Vos’ answer to this latter question is ‘no’: the Kingdom is expressed in the ‘kingdom-organism’ of the church, but is also manifest where any sphere of life comes under God’s supremacy.<sup>42</sup> Ladd notes Vos’ affirmation that

<sup>36</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 119.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Stuart Robinson, *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Joseph Wilson, 1858), pp. 50, 58. Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, vol. 1, pp. 21–22.

<sup>38</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, p. 26

<sup>39</sup> Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus*, pp. 28, 30. See also Geerhardus Vos, ‘The Kingdom of God’ in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1980), p.306.

<sup>40</sup> Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus*, p. 29. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, p. 26. Leithart similarly defines the Kingdom as ‘the new world order that Christ established in His life, death, resurrection, and ascension, a new order of things that will be fully revealed only at Christ’s return,’ *The Kingdom and the Power*, p. 17.

<sup>41</sup> Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus*, p. 150.

<sup>42</sup> Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus*, pp. 162–164. See also Berkhof.

the church is the Kingdom, but fails to note his affirmation that the Kingdom is not always the church, giving the impression that Vos simply equates Kingdom and church.

If the Kingdom is defined as both dynamic and stative, the relationship between Kingdom and church is much closer than Ladd allows. When the prophets of the Old Testament foretold the coming of God's saving reign, they also foretold a renewed people of God as part of the state of affairs, or order of things, his rule would bring about.<sup>43</sup> The new Israel would not only be the recipient of God's blessings; it would be one of those blessings, in fulfillment of Genesis 12:2–3. Thus the idea of the church is intrinsic to that of the Kingdom of God. As Ridderbos says, although *basileia* is never used to mean 'church,' 'the idea of the *ekklesia* is a very essential element in the scope of Jesus' preaching.'<sup>44</sup> He sees the foundation of this idea not in the concept of the remnant like Ladd, but in Jesus' understanding that he is the Messiah: 'the concept of a Messiah without a people is unthinkable.'<sup>45</sup> The same might be said of the New Covenant: intrinsic to this concept is a new covenant people.

#### The Nature of the Church: a Kingdom.

In Exodus 19:6, the people of Israel, gathered around Mt Sinai, are described as a 'kingdom' (*mamlekeh*, LXX *basileios*). This verse is applied to the New Testament church in 1 Peter 2:9; therefore Ladd's denial that in 'biblical idiom' the Kingdom can be identified with its subjects is doubtful.<sup>46</sup> When the prophets foretold the Kingdom, they spoke of it as a new Exodus; not only as a dynamic act of God, but as a return to the conditions of the Exodus, when God ruled over his people directly as king.<sup>47</sup> Vos sees the Kingdom as the supremacy of God in three spheres: saving power, righteousness, and blessedness.<sup>48</sup> These spheres correspond to the categories used by John Frame to summarise 'the biblical concept of Lordship,' (control, authority, and presence),<sup>49</sup> and all three can be seen during the Exodus. God's power is seen in the defeat of Egypt and Israel's other enemies; his authority is seen in the giving of the law, and his direct, personal presence is in the pillar of cloud and in the tabernacle.

<sup>43</sup> e.g., Isaiah 10:20–22, 11:11–12, 14:1–2; Jeremiah 23:3–4; Hosea 1:10–11

<sup>44</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, p. 347.

<sup>45</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, p. 348.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Leithart, *The Kingdom and the Power*, pp. 161–162

<sup>47</sup> e.g., Isaiah 11:11–12, 40:1–11; Hosea 2:14, 11:10–11; Micah 7:14–15

<sup>48</sup> Vos, 'The Kingdom of God,' pp. 312–314.

<sup>49</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1987), pp.15–18.

Israel later rejected this direct rule of God, and asked for a king, but the in the Kingdom of God there is a return to this situation under the rule of a human Davidic king who is also divine. Thus the church cannot be understood in merely sociological terms, or even simply as the people ruled by the Messiah. If the Kingdom of God has come, then the church, as the *qahal* ('assembly'), must be understood as the people directly protected and controlled by God Incarnate's power, under God's direct authority, with the law written on their hearts, and filled with God's direct personal presence through the Spirit: as his Kingdom.

Given this background, it is hard to see how the church can take its departure from men, whilst the Kingdom takes its departure from God: Ladd has a theocentric understanding of the Kingdom, but a strangely anthropocentric understanding of the church. For Ladd, it would seem that salvation is something that happens to individuals, who then associate into a church. This is in marked contrast to Robinson, for whom it was God's eternal purpose 'to redeem not only elect sinners, but an elect body of sinners.'<sup>50</sup> If the church of Christ is a kingdom, then it is right to identify it with the Kingdom of God, provided that the two are not equated.

### Matthew 16:17–19

This passage is very significant, as it is one of the few passages where Jesus uses the word *ekklēsia*, and he does so in close association with the Kingdom. Vos argues that the metaphor of a house carries over from verse 18 into verse 19. In verse 18 the house is being built, with Peter as the foundation; in v. 19 the house is complete, and Peter is given the keys as the steward responsible for its internal administration. Vos concludes that 'It is plainly excluded that the house should mean one thing in the first statement and another in the second. It must be possible, this much we may confidently affirm, to call the church the kingdom.'<sup>51</sup> R.B. Kuiper makes the same argument, although unlike Vos he understands the keys as the authority of the doorkeeper to admit or exclude from the house. Kuiper concludes that in this expression, 'the Kingdom is synonymous with the church,' but notes that elsewhere the two terms are not identical, and that the Kingdom is more extensive than the church.<sup>52</sup> However, Ladd objects that this 'presses metaphorical language too far': he sees

<sup>50</sup> Robinson, *The Church of God*, p. 39.

<sup>51</sup> Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus*, p. 150.

<sup>52</sup> R.B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), p.298.

here an ‘inseparable relationship’<sup>53</sup> between church and Kingdom, but not identity.

Vos and Kuiper do overstate their case: the use of a building metaphor in both verses does not demand that church and Kingdom be identified, especially as the metaphor does shift, with Peter having different roles in each verse, from foundation to custodian. At the same time, the connection is much closer than Ladd allows. If the keys are the keys of the gatekeeper, then the Kingdom is not purely dynamic: it is something that can be entered. Ladd denies that passages that talk about entering the Kingdom are about entering the church, but does not say why this is the case.<sup>54</sup> Also, underneath the shift in metaphor, Peter does have a similar role in both verses. He is the rock of the church as he is the first person to confess and preach Christ; and he exercises the power of the keys by preaching and teaching;<sup>55</sup> this suggests that verses 18 and 19 are talking about the same thing in different ways.<sup>56</sup> In Matthew 18:18, where the language of binding and loosing is used again, it refers to expulsion from or re-admittance to, the church. These close connections would suggest that to be admitted to the church is to be admitted to the Kingdom, and to be excluded from the church is to be excluded from the Kingdom; and that to be admitted to the Kingdom is to be admitted to the church, and to be excluded from the Kingdom is to be excluded from the church. Thus Vos and Kuiper would be correct in saying that the church can be called the Kingdom, but the Kingdom cannot always be called the church, as it is a wider concept. Regarding this passage, D.A. Carson concludes that ‘Jesus’ “church” is not the same as his “kingdom”...But neither must they be opposed to each other, as if both cannot occupy the same place in time,’ and quotes N.B. Stonehouse as saying that ‘The implication is

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<sup>53</sup> Ladd, *A New Testament Theology*, p. 112.

<sup>54</sup> Ladd, *A New Testament Theology*, p. 112.

<sup>55</sup> For exegesis see D.A. Carson, ‘Matthew’ in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8* (Frank E. Gabelein, ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 368–369, 372–373.

<sup>56</sup> There may be some grammatical support for this. Matthew 16:19 begins with an asyndeton. If v. 19 began with a connective like *de* or *kai*, then this might indicate that Jesus was introducing a new idea and role for Peter, in addition to him being the foundation of the church. The lack of a connective might indicate that v. 19 is epexegetical of v. 18: Jesus is expressing the same idea in a different way, that is, the authoritative and determinative nature of Peter’s preaching of Christ. However, I would only advance this argument with great caution.

inescapable that in the establishment of the church, there was to be a manifestation of the kingdom or rule of God.<sup>57</sup>

## Pastoral Consequences

### Evangelism

If the Kingdom of God and the church are to be identified, then the church should play a much greater part in our evangelism. In evangelistic courses and presentations such as *Two Ways to Live* and *Christianity Explored*, the church is conspicuous by its absence. It is left until a day away, or a follow-up discipleship course, where it is an indispensable part of the support structure of the Christian life; but it is not an intrinsic part of the presentation of the gospel. This can produce a familiar phenomenon: the person who has been through an evangelistic course, who understands the gospel, who may have made some kind of commitment, but who sees no need to become part of a church. If the church and the Kingdom can be identified, then the church can and should be integrated into our evangelistic presentations not only as one of the commitments a new Christian should make, but as one of the blessings of the gospel. One example of a course that does do this is *The Prodigal God* by Timothy Keller.<sup>58</sup>

### Worship and Organisation

If we make a sharp distinction between church and Kingdom as Ladd does, then we may start to think of the church as a voluntary association, that ‘takes its departure...from men.’ In this case, ecclesiology may not be regarded as very important. Thus, it is common for evangelicals to treat different forms of church government as a secondary matter. Likewise, even those who regard women’s ordination and consecration as wrong, may not regard it as a ‘gospel issue’ and may even be willing to minister in the same church or parish team as ordained women. The same flexibility of practice can also be found with respect to the content and conduct of corporate worship. But if the church is God’s Kingdom, under God’s rule,

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<sup>57</sup> Carson, ‘Matthew,’ pp. 369–370.

<sup>58</sup> See Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Discussion Guide and DVD* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), Session 6. This is based on the book *The Prodigal God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008), pp.124–126. Keller comes from the American Presbyterian tradition, where identification of church and Kingdom has been stronger than in English Evangelicalism, and he is heavily influenced by Vos, cf. *Center Church*, pp. 229–230.

then these matters cannot be left to human wisdom, or to a congregation's likes and dislikes, to decide, as they might be if the church were essentially the 'fellowship of men.' Separation of church and Kingdom has weakened evangelicalism, especially Anglican Evangelicalism, in these areas. If the church can be identified with the Kingdom of God, then it may be time for Anglican evangelicals to take another, serious look at the 'regulative principle' of Presbyterianism, without dismissing it or caricaturing it.

## Conclusion

The church and the Kingdom of God can be identified, provided we distinguish between 'identification' and 'equation,' and see the Kingdom as both dynamic and stative. If we make these distinctions, we will avoid both the trap of confusing the Kingdom with a human institution, and the trap of treating the church as merely a human association that is secondary to the gospel and the Kingdom. The church is not the sole manifestation of the Kingdom in this present age; whenever Christ is acknowledged as King, and human life brought under his rule, the Kingdom of God is visible.<sup>59</sup> For instance, when a homosexual man commits himself to celibacy, when a husband cares for a wife who has Alzheimer's, when a woman refuses to spread gossip at work, when a child tells the other children on the school bus that she is a Christian, or when a young doctor gives her life to caring for AIDS patients in Africa, and when (indeed, only when) those actions are consciously taken because the people concerned belong to Christ, the Kingdom of God is made visible. But the primary manifestation of the Kingdom of God in this age, the clearest sight of what the coming age will be like, is the people of God, the gathering and fellowship of those who are united to Christ and live under his rule, to praise him and love each other. It is here that the powers of the age to come are tasted: in the Kingdom that is identified with the church.

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<sup>59</sup> Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus*, p. 163.