

THE DIVINE CONSPIRACY

Made to Rule

What a "Kingdom" Is

To gain deeper understanding of our eternal kind of life in God's present kingdom, we must be sure to understand what a kingdom is. Every last one of us has a "kingdom"-or a "queendom," or a "government" - a realm that is uniquely our own, where our choice determines what happens. Here is a truth that reaches into the deepest part of what it is to be a person.

Some may think it should not be so. John Calvin remarked rather balefully, "Everyone flatters himself and carries a kingdom in his breast." He understood this to mean that "there is nobody who does not imagine that he is really better than the others." Perhaps this is so for human beings as they are. All too easily, at least, we presume to rule others-in opinion and word, if not in deed.

But it is nevertheless true that we are made to "have dominion" within an appropriate domain of reality. This is the core of the likeness or image of God in us and is the basis of the destiny for which we were formed. We are, all of us, never-ceasing spiritual beings with a unique eternal calling to count for good in God's great universe.

Our "kingdom" is simply the range of our effective will. Whatever we genuinely have the say over is in our kingdom. And our having the say over something is precisely what places it within our kingdom. In creating human beings God made them to rule, to reign, to have dominion in a limited sphere. Only so can they be persons.

Any being that has say over nothing at all is no person. We only have to imagine what that would be like to see that this is so. Such "persons" would not even be able to command their own body or their own thoughts. They would be reduced to completely passive observers who count for nothing, who make no difference.

The sense of having some degree of control over things is now recognized as a vital factor in both mental and physical health and can make the difference between life and death in those who are seriously ill.¹⁵ Anyone who has raised a child, or has even supervised the work of others, knows how important it is to let them do it-whatever "it" may be-and to do so as soon as that is practically feasible. Obviously, having a place of rule goes to the very heart of who we are, of our integrity, strength, and competence.

By contrast, attacks on our personhood always take the form of diminishing what we can do or have say over, sometimes up to the point of forcing us to submit to what we abhor. In the familiar human order, slaves are at the other end of the spectrum from kings. Their bodies and lives are at the disposal of another. Prisoners are, in most cases, several degrees above slaves. And, as the twentieth century has taught us, thought control is worst of all. It is the most heinous form of soul destruction, in which even our own thoughts are not really ours. It reaches most deeply into our substance.

God's "Creation Covenant" with Human Beings

Keeping in mind these truths about personality, we will not be surprised at the Bible's simple, consistent picture of human beings in relation to God. The human job description (the "creation covenant," we might call it) found in chapter 1 of Genesis indicates that God assigned to us collectively the rule over all living things on earth, animal and plant. We are responsible before God for life on the earth (vv. 28-30).

However unlikely it may seem from our current viewpoint, God equipped us for this task by framing our nature to function in a conscious, personal relationship of interactive responsibility with him. We are meant to exercise our "rule" only in union with God, as he acts with us. He intended to be our constant companion or coworker in the creative enterprise of life on earth. That is what his love for us means in practical terms.

Now, what we can do by our unassisted strength is very small. What we can do acting with mechanical, electrical, or atomic power

THE DIVINE CONSPIRACY

Page 23

is much greater. Often what can be accomplished is so great that it is hard to believe or imagine without some experience of it. But what we can do with these means is still very small compared to what we could do acting in union with God himself, who created and ultimately controls all other forces.

Lamentably, we fell away from our intended divine context and from the task for which we are by nature fitted. We mistrusted and distanced ourselves from God and then, very naturally, from one another. In our arrogance and fear we flounder through our existence on our own. The earth itself is "subjected to futility" because of this' (Rom. 8:20). However we may picture the original event, "the fall," one cannot deny that such mistrust pervasively characterizes human life today and that things do not go well on earth. History and the eleven o'clock news leave no doubt.

But at the same time our fundamental makeup is unchanged. The deepest longings of our heart confirm our original calling. Our very being still assigns us to "rule" in our life circumstances, whatever they may be. If animals are in trouble anywhere, for example, people generally feel they should do something about it-or at least that someone should. And we still experience ourselves as creative will, as someone who accomplishes things, constantly desiring to generate value, or what is good, from ourselves and from our environment. We are perhaps all too ready, given our distorted vision and will, to take charge of the earth.

Apart from harmony under God, our nature-imposed objectives go awry. The social and individual chaos of human desires sees to it. Much of our time and energy is spent trying to dominate others or escape domination by them, from "office politics" to tribal warfare to international relations on a global scale.

In the biblical account of our fall from God, we were assigned to earn our bread by the sweat of our face. The sweat comes from our own energies, which is all we have left after losing our roots in God's own life. But we relentlessly try to earn our bread by the sweat of someone else's face, even when it might be easier to use our own strength. Perhaps John Calvin was not totally wrong about us.

Redemption of Our Rule

God nevertheless pursues us redemptively and invites us individually, every last one of us, to be faithful to him in the little we truly "have

(p. 24)

say over." There, at every moment, we live in the interface between our lives and God's kingdom among us. If we are faithful to him here, we learn his cooperative faithfulness to us in turn. We discover the effectiveness of his rule with us precisely in the details of day-today existence.

Frank Laubach Wrote of how, in his personal experiment of moment-by-moment submission to the will of God, the fine texture of his work and life experience was transformed. In January of 1930 he began to cultivate the habit of turning his mind to Christ for one second out of every minute. ¹⁶

After only four weeks he reported, "I feel simply carried along each hour, doing my part in a plan which is far beyond myself. This sense of cooperation with God in little things is what so astonishes me, for I never have felt it this way before. I need something, and turn round to find it waiting for me. I must work, to be sure, but there is God working along with me."¹⁷

From a lonely missionary post in the Philippines, God raised Frank Laubach to the status of Christian world statesman and spokesman for Christ. He founded the World Literacy Crusade, still in operation today, and without any political appointment he was influential on United States foreign policy in the post-World War

11 years. But he was forever and foremost Christ's man, and always knew that his brilliant ideas and incredible energy and effectiveness derived from his practice of constant conscious interface with God.

Our Rule Extended-into Eternity

When we submit what and where we are to God, our rule or dominion then increases. In Jesus' words from the parable of the talents (Matt. 25), our Master says, "Well done! You were faithful with a few things, and I will put you in charge of many things. Share what your Lord enjoys"; that is, share the larger direction or governance of things for good (cf Luke 16: 1-12). For God is unlimited creative will and constantly invites us, even now, into an ever larger share in what he is doing. Like Jesus, we can enter into the work we see our Father doing (John 5:17-19).

In accord with his original intent, the heavenly Father has in fact prepared an individualized kingdom for every person, from the outset of creation. That may seem impossible to us. But we do have a very weak imagination toward God, and we are confused by our

p. 25

own desires and fears, as well as by gross misinformation. It is a small thing for him. As we learn through increasing trust to govern our tiny affairs with him, the kingdom he had all along planned for us will be turned over to us, at the appropriate time. "Come you who are under my Father's blessing and take over the government assigned to you from the beginning" (Matt. 25:34). Accordingly, in the last chapter of the Bible we see God's purposes in creation come round full circle in eternity: "The Lord will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 22:5).

God's Kingdom

Now God's own "kingdom," or "rule," is the range of his effective will, where what he wants done is done. The person of God himself and the action of his will are the organizing principles of his kingdom, but everything that obeys those principles, whether by nature or by choice, is within his kingdom. ¹⁸

The Old Testament book of Psalms comes to a joyous, breathtaking celebration of God's kingdom in Psalms 145-150. The picture there presented must be kept in mind whenever we try to understand his kingdom. Then we will not doubt that that kingdom has existed from the moment of creation and will never end (Ps. 145: 13; Dan. 7: 14). It cannot be "shaken" (Heb. 12: 27 f.) and is totally good. It has never been in trouble and never will be. It is not something that human beings produce or, ultimately, can hinder. We do have an invitation to be a part of it, but if we refuse we only hurt ourselves.

Accordingly, the kingdom of God is not essentially a social or political reality at all. Indeed, the social and political realm, along with the individual heart, is the only place in all of creation where the kingdom of God, or his effective will, is currently permitted to be absent. That realm is the "on earth" of the Lord's Prayer that is opposed to the "in heaven" where God's will is, simply, done. It is the realm of what is cut out "by hands," opposed to the kingdom "cut out without hands" of Daniel, chapter 2.

Thus, contrary to a popular idea, the kingdom of God is not primarily something that is "in the hearts of men." That kingdom *may* be there, and it may govern human beings through their faith and allegiance to Christ. At the present time it governs them only through their hearts, if at all. But his kingdom is not something confined to their hearts or to the "inner" world of human consciousness. It is not some matter of inner attitude or faith that might be totally disconnected from the public, behavioral, visible world. It always pervades and governs the whole of the physical universe-parts of planet earth occupied by humans and other personal beings, the satanic, slightly excepted for a while.

Also, God did not start to bring his kingdom, the "kingdom of the heavens" as Jesus often called it, into existence through Jesus' presence on earth. All too frequently it is suggested that he did. But Jesus' own gospel of the kingdom was not that the kingdom was about to come, or had recently come, into existence. If we attend to what he actually said, it becomes clear that his gospel concerned only the new accessibility of

the kingdom to humanity through himself. And, in any case, if Jesus had come announcing the existence of the kingdom, it would have been no more newsworthy to his hearers than an announcement that Moses had given laws. The "gospel" of the Old Testament, if you wish, was simply "Our God reigns!" (Isa. 52:7; Pss. 96, 97, 99). Everyone knew that. It was the cry of deliverance as Israel emerged from Egypt through the Red Sea (Exod. 15: 18). It was understood by all that "God caused His glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses" (Isa. 63: 12). That "arm" was, simply, God's rule in action.

So when Jesus directs us to pray, "Thy kingdom come," he does not mean we should pray for it to come into existence. Rather, we pray for it to take over at all points in the personal, social, and political order where it is now excluded: "On earth as it is in heaven." With this prayer we are invoking it, as in faith we are acting it, into the real world of our daily existence.

Within his overarching dominion God has created us and has given each of us, like him, a range of will-beginning from our minds and bodies and extending outward, ultimately to a point not wholly predetermined but open to the measure of our faith. His intent is for us to learn to mesh our kingdom with the kingdoms of others. Love of neighbor, rightly understood, will make this happen. But we can only love adequately by taking as our primary aim the integration of our rule with God's. That is why love of neighbor is the second, not the first, commandment and why we are told to seek first the kingdom, or rule, of God. Only as we find that kingdom and settle into it can we human beings all reign, or rule, together with God. We will then enjoy individualized "reigns" with neither isolation nor conflict. This is the ideal of human existence for which secular idealism vainly strives. Small wonder that, as Paul says, "Creation eagerly awaits the revealing of God's children" (Rom. 8:19).

The Kingdom Is Now "at Hand"

These matters are now widely misunderstood. The invitation to come out of the darkness and live right-side up in the light makes no sense to many. Thus we need to restate and further explain some of the essential points we have already made about the eternal kind of life now available to us within the ever-present governance of God.

Jesus came among us to show and teach the life for which we were made. He came very gently, opened access to the governance of God with him, and set afoot a conspiracy of freedom in truth among human beings. Having overcome death he remains among us. By relying on his word and presence we are enabled to reintegrate the little realm that makes up our life into the infinite rule of God. And that is the eternal kind of life. Caught up in his active rule, our deeds become an element in God's eternal history. They are what God and we do together, making us part of his life and him a part of ours.

"Ultimate reality" -to speak grandly-permits itself to be addressed and dealt with through the Son of man, Jesus. Indeed, by taking the title Son of man, he staked his claim to be all that the human being was originally supposed to be-and surely much more. Colloquially we might describe him as humanity's "fair-haired boy," the one who expresses its deepest nature and on whom its hopes rest. Older theologians soberly referred to him as "the representative man" or the "federal head" of humanity.

We have noted how he entered human history through the life of an ordinary family. But then, as God's flash point in reigniting eternal life among us, he inducts us into the eternal kind of life that flows through himself. He does this first by bringing that life to bear upon our needs, and then by diffusing it throughout our deeds-deeds done with expectation that he and his Father will act with and in our actions.

Because of so much misunderstanding on this particular point, we must reemphasize that in speaking of the kingdom of the heavens "at hand," Jesus' was not speaking of something that was about to happen but had not yet happened an might not.

In the course of human events there are always plenty of things that are on the horizon of possibility but do not come about or that come about later. And there certainly is a dimension of still future realization of God's rule. But the term *eggiken*-usually translated as "is at hand" or "has drawn nigh" in such passages as

Matt. 3:2; 4: 17; 10:7; Mark 1:15; and Luke 10:9; II-is a verb form indicating a past and completed action. It is best translated simply "has come."²⁰

The reality of God's rule, and all of the instrumentalities it involves, is present in action and available with and through the person of Jesus. That is Jesus' gospel. The obvious present reality of the kingdom is what provoked the responses we have just discussed. New Testament passages make plain that this kingdom is not something to be "accepted" now and enjoyed later, but something to be entered now (Matt. 5:20; 18:3; John 3:3, 5). It is something that already has flesh-and-blood citizens (John 18:36; Phil. 3:20) who have been transformed into it (Col. 1: 13) and are fellow workers in it (Col. 4: 11).

The apostle Paul on one occasion describes it simply as "righteousness and peace and joy" of a type that only occurs "through the energizing of the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14: 17). That it is not of, or not derived from, this world or "here": does not mean that it is not real or that it is not in this world (John 18:36). It is, as Jesus said, constantly in the midst of human life (Luke 17: 21; cf Deut. 7: 21). Indeed, it means that it is more real and more present than any human arrangement could ever possibly be.

In the Midst of Many Kingdoms

We Become Bearers of God's Rule "at Hand." Those who have been touched by forgiveness and new life and have thus entered into God's rule become, like Jesus, bearers of *ilial* rule. We must reemphasize this point also. Once in replying to some of his critics Jesus made this statement:

"If I by the finger of God expel demons from people, then it is the Kingdom of God that has come upon you" (Luke 11:20).

It came in his person and acted in his actions. This was not an entirely new phenomenon in biblical events. When the Egyptian magicians in Pharaoh's court saw what happened at the word-of Moses, they acknowledged, "This is the finger of God" (Exod. 8: 19). And the Ten Commandments were said to have been inscribed in stone by the finger of God (Exod. 31 : 18). But the divine co-action was to be true for Jesus' trainees, or apprentices, also. After a time of instruction he sent them out to do what he did. As they went they were. to heal the sick and announce that "the Kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 10:9). Even those who refused their ministry were to be informed that "the Kingdom" had come to them (v. 11). C. H. Dodd strikingly expresses how God's kingdom was present with Christ and his apostles:

"In what sense, then, did Jesus declare that the Kingdom of God was present? Our answer must at least begin with His own answer to John: "The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the Gospel preached to them." In the ministry of Jesus Himself the divine power is released in effective conflict with evil."

But Other Kingdoms Remain

One thing that may mislead us about the meaning of "at hand" in Jesus' basic message is the fact that other "kingdoms" are still present on earth along with the kingdom of the heavens. They too are "at hand." That is the human condition. Persons other than God, such as you or I, are still allowed on earth to have a "say" that is contrary to his will. A kingdom of darkness is here, certainly, and the kingdoms of many individuals who are still "trying to run their own show."

All of this God still permits. And the lack of human unity in intelligent love under God not only leaves us at the mercy of manmade disasters, such as wars, famine, and oppression, but also prevents our dealing successfully with many so-called natural evils, such as disease, scarcity, and weather-related disasters. So, along with the "already here" there obviously remains a "not yet" aspect with regard to God's present rule on earth.

The present situation of kingdoms in conflict is one eloquently portrayed in the Twenty-third Psalm: "In the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil." Yes, but the "evil" is very much here to be feared. And: "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." The "enemies" are certainly here, but we are safe in God's hands even though other "kingdoms" loom over us and threaten us.

Sometimes the places where God's effective or actual rule is not yet carried out, and his will is not yet done, lie within the lives and little kingdoms of those who truly have been invaded by the eternal kind of life itself—those who really do belong to Christ because his life is already present and growing within them. The "interior castle" of the human soul, as Teresa of Avila called it, has many rooms, and they are slowly occupied by God, allowing us time and room to grow. That is a crucial aspect of the conspiracy. But even this does not detract from the reality of the "kingdom among us." Nor does it destroy the choice that all have to accept it and bring their life increasingly into it.

Right beside and among the kingdoms that are not God's stands his kingdom, always "at hand." It is that of Jesus and his heavenly Father. It can be ours as well. The door is open, and life in that kingdom is real. Even now "the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isa. 6: 3). True, few see it. The earth is not yet "filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." But that too one day "shall be" (Heb. 2:14).