



Christ Reformed Community Church

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February 19, 2023

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“The Pitfall of Church-Centered Idolatry, #1” Ephesians 2:19–22

We begin here this morning by turning to Ephesians chapter 2. I just want to read a few verses from Ephesians chapter 2, beginning in verse number 19. You’re familiar with it. Paul says:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

As we continue to discuss the principle of church membership and really, I guess, what we’re trying to do in two classes is give a summarized understanding on the one hand the significance of being a member of a local church, but I think on the other hand, the significance of being a member of the universal church. And here in Ephesians chapter 2, Paul is, of course, speaking about the local church by implication, but really his emphasis here is on the church universal. That is, all believers that presently live on this earth, and we could even say believers who have died and gone to be with the Lord, those who are part of the church, those who are part of the bride of Christ. He calls us here in verse 21 “*a holy temple in the Lord,*” and says that we’re “*being built together.*” That phraseology means that the kingdom has not been consummated yet. Christ hasn’t returned yet. The church is still being built. There are still those who are being converted, and He’s building it “*together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*” So, there is this concept, then, of the church universal. There is this concept of believers meeting this morning, not merely here at Christ Reformed but in other parts of our community in Saint John’s County, Duval County, Jacksonville, Florida, in our nation, and around the world. And I say all that to say that this will probably be the strangest church membership class that you’ve ever been part of, certainly the strangest one that I’ve ever taught. The title that I want to give it this morning is simply this: “The Pitfall of Church-Centered Idolatry,” “The Pitfall of Church-Centered Idolatry,”

Now, since I came up with that term, I’m going to define it, and here’s how I would define church-centered idolatry. Church-centered idolatry is this: viewing your local church and your membership in your local church as your only participation and responsibility in Christ’s kingdom, as you pursue individual sanctification and spiritual growth by serving the church and using your spiritual gifts in the local church. Let me say that again. Church-centered idolatry is viewing your local church and your membership in your local church as your only participation and responsibility in Christ’s kingdom, as you pursue individual sanctification and spiritual growth by serving your local church and using your spiritual gifts within the local church. You’re in

Ephesians 2, but if you flip back to Ephesians chapter 1, picking up in verse 21, it’s speaking about Christ, and it says that He is: “...*far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*”

It’s interesting because verse 21 says that He has the type of power that is over all rule, all authority, all dominion “*not only in this age but also in the one to come.*” So, Christ is at the right hand of God, and He is currently ruling and reigning, but He is not merely ruling and reigning just over the church. He has a larger kingdom. In fact, verse 22 says, “*And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church.*” So obviously, Christ is the head of the church, but as verse 22 says, He is “*over all things,*” all things are “*under his feet,*” and He is the “*head over all things,*” we could say, for the sake of the church. “*All things under his feet.*” That means the entire universe. That means that Christ’s kingdom is much bigger than us here this morning. I hope you do realize that and acknowledge that. To make this argument to absolutize or to overemphasize the church as the most important institution of your life is to commit church-centered idolatry. To absolutize or overemphasize the church as the most important institution of your life is to commit church-centered idolatry. Now, that statement is purposefully provocative, but it’s also necessarily true, and I want to seek to prove that statement, that we are guilty of church-centered idolatry if we view the church institution as the most important aspect of our lives, by making three arguments. Let me list them to you first.

Number one, I want to deconstruct, or another word for that is dismantle, false assumptions about the church. So, I’m going to deconstruct assumptions about the church, which I view are erroneous and unbiblical. Secondly, I’m going to distinguish certain aspects of the church that maybe we don’t always give due attention to. And then third, I want to determine application for the church. So, those are my three points: deconstruct assumptions about the church, distinguish aspects of the church, and determine application for the church to make the argument that if you overemphasize the church as the most important institution of your life, you’re guilty of committing church-centered idolatry.

So, let’s begin, number one, by deconstructing assumptions about the church. Let’s dismantle some false assumptions about the church to lay the groundwork in which we can see biblically that what I’m saying is in fact true. And I have a question and then a quotation that I want to give you under this first heading: deconstructing assumptions about the church. Here’s the question: Should the church assert itself and assert its beliefs on other institutions in society as if the church is the only agent of the gospel message of the kingdom? Or maybe better, are the church and the kingdom absolutely identical so that the kingdom is the church, and the church is the kingdom? If that were the case, then the local church would be the most important institution that God ever established, if the church and the kingdom are absolutely identical. But let me ask you a question, do you only enter the kingdom of God when you come into the four interior walls of this building where Christ Reformed Community Church meets? And then do you exit the kingdom when you go to get into your cars and to go home? Here’s another question: Does Christ only manifest His rule and His reign at the church, or in your own personal devotional life? A lot of Christians view it that way. Christ is ruling and reigning in my heart. Christ is ruling and reigning at the church, but when I

leave the church and I go out into the world, I don't want to have anything to do with it because Christ isn't ruling there. Satan is ruling there.

So, we segment ourselves away from the world, and we focus upon our own spiritual growth. To hell with everything else. We focus upon our attendance at church, the use of our spiritual gifts, and our investment in the local church as if Christ isn't ruling and reigning outside of the church. Is the church the only place where Christ rules because it's where God's people collectively and visibly have Christ ruling over their lives as they sit under the Word of God and submit to it? So that's the question: Is the church and kingdom identical? Maybe you've not thought about that, but that is a critically important question. Now, let me give you a quote, and this quote is a famous one. It is from Abraham Kuyper. He says this and I quote: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign overall, does not cry, ‘Mine!’” So if that's true, if there's not a square inch in the whole domain over human existence over which Christ who is sovereign over all does not cry, “Mine!” then we have to assert that the kingdom and the church are not exactly identical.

Are we to Christianize the world in the Great Commission by preaching the gospel, or are we to “churchify” the world? Which one? Are we to Christianize it, or are we to “churchify” it? What sphere or part of your life does Christ not lay claim to? Is He just ruling over the church but not your family, your marriage? He's the Lord of every individual. Ephesians 1 said He put all things under Christ as King, and He is head over all things for the sake of the church. So, Christ did not die for the world; He died for the church. He died for His bride, and in the bride are people from all parts of the world, but Jesus died for His bride in order that He might redeem the world, the cosmos. That would be a biblical understanding of the rule and reign of Christ. Psalm 50:10–12 says that God owns “*the cattle on a thousand hills.*” Well, what about a thousand and one hills, or a thousand and two hills? The point is that's a figurative number to say He owns everything. Everything is God's.

Now, here is why I'm bringing up this desire to, I guess you could say, deconstruct false assumptions about the church. Here's what happens. If we are not careful, we will end up overemphasizing or absolutizing one sphere of Christ's rule over another. And you see this happening throughout church history. For example, if one absolutizes the family, you have a man who comes to church, and he tells the elders, “You have no authority over my wife and children.” We've had people basically say that, and you have the whole home church movement where an arrogant father thinks there's no one who can speak wisdom and Scripture into the lives of his family. What has he done? He has absolutized the family. He has said the family is the most important institution in the world that God has established, and what he is doing is he is diminishing the power of the gospel because he is separating himself from the gifts and influence of the saints in the church from impacting his family to help him be the father and husband he should be. That's one sphere of the family.

Well, what happens if we absolutize the individual? And this is common in our culture today with Christians and non-Christians. People isolate themselves from one another, and isolating themselves from one another means they're isolating themselves from accountability. But as we read the Bible, God created the world to be a community. God created us as His image bearers to reflect the Trinity, which is that inner sanctum of heavenly sweet fellowship between Father, Son,

and Holy Spirit. So, when one absolutizes the sphere of the individual, someone who says, “I don’t need anybody else,” it undermines the creation order, which says we do need one another. We do need the church. Even God said, *“It is not good that [the] man should be alone,”* and He created a wife for Adam. So, we can absolutize the sphere of the family and be unbalanced. We can absolutize the sphere of the individual and be unbalanced, or we can absolutize the state, and that is exactly what’s happening in our day as well. This always results in the government replacing God. The state is the most important institution, people say. The state is our sugar daddy. The state is who we are dependent upon. The state provides welfare for people that can’t afford certain things. The state determines whether you are sick or healthy. The state determines what kind of insurance you have and what doctor you can see. This is absolutizing the state. It’s saying that the most important sphere that God has established is the state, the government, and this supplants the true gospel.

So, if we absolutize the family, we diminish the power of the gospel. We take our family away from the distinctions that are in the church and the various gifts. If we absolutize the individual, we undermine the creation order. If we absolutize the state, we suppress the truth of both the law of God and the gospel of God. And if we absolutize the church, we end up making the church the most important institution, opposing the state, opposing the family, and supplanting the true gospel because if the church is the most important institution we’re going back to medieval times. We’re going back to the Roman Catholic Church and the statements that were made that in order to be saved, you are saved through mother church and all of the things that are associated with mother church. So, let me ask you this question: How can the family be less important than the church? Scripture has all sorts of admonitions on how husbands are to treat their wives and wives are to treat their husbands and how parents are to raise their children. Or let me pose it this way, how can the individual be more important than the family? I assure you that’s not the case in my family. If you go to my house, my wife runs a very tight ship, and there’s no one who’s going to live in that house with free boarding. Everyone has a responsibility. Everyone has chores. The individual is not more important than the family.

How can the state be more important than the individual, the family, or the church? It’s not, regardless of what politicians tell you. That is statism, and that is unbiblical. So, the pitfall of church-centered idolatry occurs when the institute of the church is the Christian’s greatest priority over the other spheres of Christ’s universal reign. So, you have the kingdom of God, the sphere of the individual, the sphere of the family, the sphere of the church, the sphere of the state. These are different spheres where Christ’s authority is manifested, but they all fit under the category of Christ’s kingdom, and if you’re a Christian, you’re in His kingdom. You’re not just in His church. You’re in all of these spheres, and as Christians, we are to live to the glory of God in all of these spheres.

Now, to strengthen this proposition, which I do admit is rather provocative, that to overemphasize the church as the most important institution of your life is to commit church-centered idolatry, let me move to the second point. We’ve dismantled or deconstructed false assumptions about the church, but let me give you a second point. Let’s now distinguish certain aspect of the church. So, we want to have a proper ecclesiology when we speak about the church. Turn with me just quickly, and I know you’re familiar with it, to Matthew chapter 16, Matthew chapter 16. Jesus’ words to Peter: *“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell*

shall not prevail against it.” “Church,” it’s the Greek word *ekklēsia*. It’s actually rendered from two Hebrew words, *qāhāl* and *edah*. If you read the Greek version of the Old Testament and the Septuagint, *ekklēsia* is used to describe “the congregation of Israel.” So, anytime you see “the congregation of Israel,” it’s the Greek word *ekklēsia*, *ekklēsia* of Israel. In the new covenant, the church is the called-out people of God gathered together and united under the preaching of the gospel and brought together through the preaching of the gospel. That is the church, those who gather together, who name the name of Christ under the Word of God. One theologian describes five different aspects of the church, and I’m borrowing this material because I think that these five different aspects are critical for us to understand what we’re speaking about when we we’re speaking about the church.

First, this theologian refers to the worldwide invisible church. Okay, the worldwide invisible church is the historical church that transcends all points in history all the way up to the second coming of Christ. So to give you maybe just a little taste of this, in Ephesians chapter 3—you don’t have to turn there—Paul speaks about bringing “*to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*” Paul says, “*This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” So, part of God’s eternal purpose before the foundation of the world was “*that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might [now] be made known*” in his world. So, the church is the agent in which Christ reveals His glory and His gospel to the world. Well, Paul’s speaking about the worldwide invisible church, the true people of God that have always existed no matter what period in human history. That’s the first aspect of the church, the worldwide historical invisible church.

Secondly, we have the historical visible church, and this would be the church as we read about it in the Bible or in history books with all of the warts of apostasy and, we could say, the wonders of Reformation, the visible church, all things that have happened, good and bad. And, of course, the Bible speaks about this. It speaks about the fact that there are goats and there are sheep. There are tares and there are wheat. So, whether you have sort of the church in seed form in the Old Testament, you have a remnant of Israel that was saved that was the true people of God, but the rest were just a visible people of God. And in the new covenant, when the church has been built through the instrumentation of Christ and His gospel, you still have believers and unbelievers who are part of the visible church.

Third, when we’re speaking about the church, we need to speak on the actual church in the present, and this is the easiest one. This is the church as we know it now, all true believers living on earth at this time—not ones who have died and gone to heaven, not ones who haven’t been born yet, but the present church right now. For example, Paul writes about his testimony in the book of Galatians, and he says, “*For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.*” Well, Paul lived at a certain point in history, right? He couldn’t destroy what came before him. He couldn’t destroy what came after him. Paul was a human being living at a certain time sovereignly by God, at a fixed point in history where the church existed, and that church of Paul’s present day, he sought violently to destroy before he was converted on the Damascus road. So, that’s an aspect of the church.

The fourth aspect of the church is the local church. So, I guess the best way to describe this would be for example, the church at Corinth. Paul says, *“For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.”* So, Paul says, *“When you come together as [the] church.”* Now, when he says the Corinthians are the church, he doesn’t mean they’re the only church that exists, right? But they are part of the universal church. They are part of the worldwide invisible church. They’re part of the historical visible church. They’re part of the actual church in the present, and they’re an actual local church.

And then fifth, this theologian says there are parts of local churches within a region. So, not everyone in our church is present this morning. Not everyone at any church in this area is present at their church. That’s an impossibility. That very rarely happens. And sometimes you have segments of local churches that might meet over here for a Bible study or that might go out for lunch and have fellowship and have a theological discussion. So, there are different aspects of the church. I point all that out to say that today when we speak about the church, we often overlook the worldwide invisible church of history. We focus on the here and now. We say, *“I’m going to church tomorrow,”* and by that what we mean is we’re going to our church that we’re a member of. Or if me and my family are out of town, we say, *“We’re going to go to church,”* but we mean a different church than the one we’re members of. Or we speak about the church in a denominational sense, like the Southern Baptist Church, as if the entirety of the church is captured in one denomination with a capital city being Nashville, but people speak that way. They’re so narrowminded that they think that’s the church.

Well, what do these five aspects of the church teach us? Here it is. Here is my point. Do not miss this. Kingdom life for the Christian cannot be restricted to one’s involvement in their local church. Why? Because the church itself is bigger than your local church, and the kingdom of God is even bigger than that. Now, lest you think I’m trying to work myself out of a job and get you to leave, it is abundantly clear in the New Testament—in fact, there’s not one example of a true Christian that wasn’t part of a local church in the New Testament. So, church membership is important. The local church is important. The elders who govern the church are important. The preaching of the Word that they sit under must be done carefully, the observance and right administration of the sacraments, church discipline, public prayer, worship. But one theologian says this, and I quote: *“The church exercising authority over other societal relationships like the family or the state, or over other parts of society, is pure scholasticism.”* And I’m going to explain that. He says a certain Protestant denomination, let’s say, now usurping the position that the Roman Catholic Church had during the Middle Ages. So, if we overemphasize the church, we’re falling into the medieval understanding that the church is more important than the family and the church is more important than the state. And that’s why during the medieval period, you had the church pulling the strings of the state, and sometimes the state kind of pulling back, and where was the family in all of this? The family wasn’t important. The family was not an emphasis.

If you read church history, it was John Calvin and Martin Luther that recovered a biblical understanding of the family, a biblical understanding of one’s commitment to their wife, one’s commitment to their husband, and the joint partnership of raising children *“in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,”* and having a correct understanding of baptism that did not say baptism saves your child but that baptism places your child within a covenant home and a covenant church where they receive the overflow of the blessing of hearing the good news of salvation so they could

be saved. A recovery of the gospel was a recovery of the family, and Calvin would have never said the church was more important than the family, and he would have never said the state is more important than both, or the church is more important—a right place of the family. So, think about your Christian life for a moment. Let’s make this really practical. Are you prepared to say this morning that your church membership at Christ Reformed is more important than your marriage, or that it’s more important than your parenting, or that it’s more important than your responsibilities at work? I hope you don’t say that because you may be without a job, you may be without a spouse, and your kids may hate you.

Does not the kingdom of God on earth include all of our responsibilities in all of these spheres? Our marriages, the raising of our children, our responsibility to work at our vocation, our station in life that God has ordained, our responsibility to love our neighbor as ourself and be a good, well-respected citizen in the community that builds relationships even with unbelievers, not separated and secluded off somewhere. So, I submit that if you view these relationships—family, state, church, sphere of your vocation, everything in society—if you view these as equal in importance to the church, your responsibility in them, then you have a balanced framework by which you can honor the Lord in the totality of your life and not just your church life. Because you see, what so often happens is, in my pastoral experience, someone who has a church-centered idolatrous mindset will come to church and appear to be really pious, really have things together, but when you investigate further, they’re shirking duties in the home. They’re shirking duties at their job. They’re shirking their duties just about everywhere, but they use the church as a means to build themselves up as a high and mighty Christian, and that is a very dangerous thing to do. So, your commitment to the local church is not more important than your commitment to manifest the rule and reign of Christ in all of these other spheres—family, your home, church, society, your workplace—all of these things. Think about it for a moment. Local churches come and go. Revelation 2 and 3, seven churches in Asia Minor, none exist today. God said and promised He would build the church. What did He mean by that? He meant the church universal. He meant the church invisible. He meant that He would call all His elect sheep in because it’s built on Christ Himself and the apostles. He says that to the Corinthians.

But lest we think that the local church is unimportant now, let’s sort of balance things out. Paul wrote—and let’s mention Corinth again—Paul wrote to specific local churches like Corinth on the importance of ordering themselves properly, right? They were not doing things in decency and in order, and so Paul had to write to them and say, “Your ecclesiology is wrong.” Paul wrote to Timothy, and he wrote to Titus to say, “Here’s how a proper ecclesiology should look. Here’s how the church should be structured.” So, there are places where Paul emphasizes the local church. The local church is not unimportant. He says in 1 Timothy 5 that you’re not to muzzle the ox while he’s treading out and eating the grain. So that there are to be full-time pastors who are paid to give themselves to the local church their whole lives. Paul even said the church is the “*pillar and the buttress of truth*,” right, in 1 Timothy 3:15? But Paul also in these epistles to the church spoke about the responsibilities of Christians in other spheres than the church, like marriage, Ephesians 5, right? “*Wives submit to your [own] husbands.*” “*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church.*” Of course, the church is important. Christ gave himself for it, but He also gave you a wife. Love her like Christ loved the church, and wives submit to your husbands as the church submits to Christ. Paul does that in Ephesians 5. He does it in Colossians 3.

So, he speaks about the sphere of the family and emphasizing the importance of marriage, the importance of childrearing, not exacerbating our children. He even speaks to children themselves and says, “*Obey your parents.*” What’s he doing? He’s speaking about this sphere of the home. He also speaks about the sphere of the state, Paul does, in Romans 13. Peter speaks about it in 1 Peter 2, submit yourself to the governing authorities. They have been put there by God. They are ministers for your good. He also speaks in Ephesians and Colossians, Paul does, about slaves submitting to masters, and masters not being too domineering over their slaves, which we could translate into the employer/employee relationship. He also speaks, Peter does and Paul does, but Peter more specifically, about shepherding the flock of God. Remember this in 1 Peter 5, not being too domineering? So, there’s the sphere of the church where the elders are not to be too domineering, but they are leaders. Hebrews says obey your leaders. You see how balanced Scripture is and how cockeyed we can make it by overemphasizing this over here and neglecting everything else, or overemphasizing this and neglecting everything else? And we live in a confusing world where Christians think the state can tell us when to worship, or when fathers think they don’t need to be members of a local church and submit to elders, or where church elders domineer over the saints because they don’t know how to submit to their boss. So, they come into the church and they’re tyrants. It’s all over the place. Just read the news.

So, as important as the church is and indeed it is, as an institution, it’s local assembly form is but one expression of the manifestation of the kingdom of God in the world. That’s what I want you to understand. You have a responsibility to demonstrate the rule and reign of Christ in your marriage and the raising of your children, at the workplace, when you go to the store, if you have a business to use your platform and to leverage it in such a way that you’re giving the gospel to people, you’re Christianizing the workplace.

H.A. Ironside was a famous preacher, and in my early days of preaching when I was a young teenager, our church had a library and it had his whole commentary set in the library, and so I used to go in there and prepare my sermons, pull these commentaries down. But H.A. Ironside was a shoemaker before he was a preacher, and his responsibility as a young man was to prepare the leather for the shoes. So, he would cut the cowhide. He would soak the cowhide in water, and then he would pound it until it was hard and dry. It was a long process and somewhat tedious, and young H.A. Ironside went to his boss one day and he said, “Don’t you think I’m wasting time in all of this labor of preparing this leather? It’s just leather.” And in fact, on one occasion, he put the leather on the shoehorn or whatever it was to create the form and it was still wet, and his boss came to him and gave him a hard time about it. And he complained, and his boss quoted Colossians 3:23: “*Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.*” His boss told H.A. Ironside, “I make shoes for God’s glory. I make shoes as if on judgment day, God himself is going to inspect every pair I make.” That so stuck with H.A. Ironside that when the Lord called him into the ministry, he was meticulous in preparing sermons. He was meticulous in being the pastor God called him to be because he understood that everything we do in life, whether we’re a minister or we have some other vocation, like making shoes, we are to do it to the glory of the God.

So, let’s have a thought experiment. Which is better, a Christian business or a Christian in a non-Christian business with kingdom and gospel influence? Which is better, a Christian soccer club or

a Christian influencing a non-Christian soccer club with gospel influence, kingdom influence? Which is better, a Christian coffeehouse as sort of a church-sanctioned ministry to interact with the lost, or a Christian working at a non-Christian coffeehouse with liberals and piercings and tattoos and men who look like women and women who look like men with a gospel influence, kingdom influence? I would submit that both are needed. It’s not a one-size-fits-all, but a Christian’s influence is not limited to ministry inside the church—that’s the point—or ministry outside of the church that’s sanctioned by the church. No, we’re called to be everything we can be for God all the time in every sphere, in all the daily tasks we do. The Bible helps us see that if the work is good and true, we’re living for eternity. That’s Colossians 3:23, working heartily as unto the Lord.

Now, I can’t believe it’s only 10:46. Is that true? This clock is wrong. What time is it? Okay, so we’re going to introduce the third point, and we’ll end on time. I’m arguing that we want to be careful not to fall into the pit of church-centered idolatry, number one, by deconstructing assumptions about the church. The kingdom is not the church; the church is not the kingdom. Number 2, by distinguishing different aspects of the church. You can speak about the church in a number of different ways. It doesn’t minimize the importance of the local church. In fact, it shows the importance of the local church, but the importance of the local church in its proper place. Now, third, let’s determine application for the church. And before we get super practical, next week will be a little bit more practical, I’m going to have to take another session to finish this. We need to work a little bit more in the area of theology to determine application for the church.

So, there are two theological categories that place us on the path of application in everything that I’m saying, okay? Number one, we need to understand the nature of the kingdom. Now, we’ve already seen that the kingdom is not the church, and the church is not the kingdom, but what is the nature of the kingdom, exactly? We want to explore that. And then secondly, what is the purpose of the Sabbath? These two things are important theological categories that will help us understand how to apply all this. So, let’s just begin in the three or four minutes we have left to talk about the nature of the kingdom.

Now, let me start by making this point: the kingdom is distinct, as I said, from the church institute. Geerhardus Vos, who was a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary in the late 1800s, early 1900s, points out the fact that Jesus in the gospels speaks all the time about the kingdom of God, but He only speaks two times about the church: Matthew 16:18 and Matthew 18:17. Now, Geerhardus Vos was a Reformed solid Calvinistic church-loving fellow, but he said, “The kingdom of God was more emphasized by Jesus than the church because the church was only mentioned by Christ twice.” And then he goes on to say that the Greek word for “church” is *ekklēsia*. We’ve already pointed that out, and the Greek word for “kingdom” is *basileia*, two different words because the church and the kingdom are not identical. And here’s what Vos says, and I quote: “The conception of the kingdom is common to all periods of our Lord’s teaching. That of the church emerges only at two special points of his ministry as recorded in Matthew 16:18 and Matthew 18:17.” Now, that’s just an observation.

Another Reformed thinker, Herman Ridderbos who has had an influence on me through the years says this, and I quote: “The concept of *basileia*,” that’s the Greek word for kingdom, “nowhere occurs in the sense of this idea of the *ekklesia*.” In other words, he says you can’t read your Bible

and confuse the church for the kingdom or the kingdom for the church. It doesn't exist. Nor can the kingdom “be embodied,” he says, “in the form and organization of the church.” No, by the term “kingdom of God” we can denote not only the fulfilling and completing action of God in relation to the entire cosmos, but also various facets of this all-embracing process. Thus, the territory within which this divine action occurs and in which the blessings of the kingdom are enjoyed is called the *basileia* of God or that of heaven. So, the blessings of the kingdom that we enjoy is the kingdom of God, the *basileia*. So, the church is distinct from the kingdom.

Secondly, the kingdom is also distinct from ethnic Israel. So let me just say this. We started in Ephesians 2, right? So just turn back there. In Ephesians 2:11, Paul shows a dichotomy. He says:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.

Now, Paul is saying there's one covenant, there's one way of salvation, there's one people of God; but in the old covenant economy, generally speaking, gentiles were not included, and if they were included, they had to be circumcised and become Jewish. In the new covenant, something has changed. Now the gospel goes out to the world. The gentiles are brought in, or as he says in Romans, “grafted in.” They don't have to go back to Judaism. In fact, they shouldn't go to Judaism. That is to add something to the gospel. They don't need to be circumcised. They believe in Christ. Now baptism has replaced circumcision. They're part of the church, and God in the new covenant has brought Jew and gentile together in Christ. You say, “Well, I don't really see a difference between the Old Testament and New Testament. It's really the same thing.” Then you're not reading the Bible, and you're not reading Reformed theology, and you're also undermining the significance of the resurrection.

So, you're telling me that everything is the same as it was in the Old Testament, pretty much the same, and yet we have a dead man coming to life, walking out of a grave, and ascending to heaven to rule and reign, and you think things are just like they were in the Old Testament? I don't think so. That's why it's called the new covenant. It doesn't mean the church didn't exist in the Old Testament, but there is discontinuity that must be recognized or you eclipse the glory of Christ. And part of what Reformed thinkers point out is the fact that the church is so much better than Old Testament Israel. The church has the glory of Christ. The church is composed of Jews and gentiles. The church has people from all walks of life, from the whole world coming into it. The church now shows the world who is truly King. Why did Jesus come to this world? First John 5, to destroy the works of the devil. And so, the kingdom of God is different than Old Testament ethnic Israel.

We still affirm one God, one covenant, one covenant of grace, one people of God, but there is a difference. And the difference of the kingdom and our understanding of the nature of the kingdom helps us see the proper place of the local church because now we understand we cannot walk one square inch in this world without walking on a piece of property that belongs to King Jesus. That is vastly different than anything Old Testament Israel experienced in old covenant times. The

death, burial and resurrection of Christ has ushered in and inaugurated the kingdom of God, and what does Jesus say we should pray? *“Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done...in heaven.”* What did I skip? *“On earth as it is in heaven.”* So, if the kingdom is the church and the church is the kingdom, then what we do here completely leaves the world out of it, and the Bible says the world is to be included. The larger kingdom of God has all of these spheres: the family, the state, the church, everything. We are to be all things to all people to the glory of Christ wherever we’re at, wherever we walk. We don’t enter the kingdom when we come here and then exit the kingdom when we go out there into the dirty, grimy world that we don’t want to be part of. We must be willing to get our hands dirty.

In fact, next week we’ll talk about the Sabbath, and I’ll leave you with this. The principle of the Sabbath has less to do with what we do one day of the week in resting and more to do with what we do the other six days, which is work. And what do we work for? We work for the kingdom of God in the advancement of His glory in the world. So, we’ll finish that up next time.

Father, thank you for Your grace and Your goodness and just Your kindness to us in helping us, Lord, understand by Your Spirit the clarity of Scripture, the difference between the church and the kingdom, which is so critical. Otherwise, we have such an unbalanced view of this sphere or that sphere of authority. Help us, Lord. We know we’re all guilty and weak at times of really perverting Your Word, overemphasizing something and then neglecting another thing. Help us to be whole Bible Christians that love Christ and live for His glory. I pray for those who seek to become new members, that You would empower them to understand the importance of the local church and the importance of every other sphere they are a part of. By Your sovereignty, we pray and ask these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.