

The Pilgrim's Pathway

**The Bible, the Church, and the World:
A Third Way (10)**

**The Second Way:
Klineanism/Religious Secularism (v)**

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Last time, in evaluating Darryl Hart's analysis of and recommendation for living as Christians in today's world, we explained that his solution reduces Christian spirituality and identity in the world. In this article, we continue our evaluation, this time by explaining that his solution restricts Christ's sovereignty in the world.

These two criticisms are closely related, and their connection needs to be made clear. We are moving from considering the identity of *Christians* in the world now to consider the identity of *Christ* in the world. By this order of discussion, we are not suggesting that Christ's identity is derived from that of his followers, or that the needs of Christians-in-the-world determine the provisions of Christ-in-the-world. Rather, by this order of discussion we wish to probe still more deeply to uncover a most serious difficulty with Hart's proposal.

Put in question form, the concern is this: If Hart's recommended solution represents a reduction of the Christian's spirituality and identity in the structures, relationships, and responsibilities associated with living in the world, then is he not also compelled to limit or restrict the sovereignty of Jesus Christ over these same structures, relationships, and responsibilities? Indeed, that is his position. In his own words, Hart and his friends seek to persuade us of "the reduced character of Christ's sovereignty in the Christian era." According to religious secularism, not only does the Bible govern the church alone, not only is Christian spirituality restricted to the life of the church alone, but the sovereignty of our Messiah-King Jesus is limited to believers alone.

Last time, we were echoing the criticisms of others when we wrote:

Christianity is not simply a religion whose beliefs and principles can be put into practice—or not—depending on what day of the week it is. According to the Bible, Sunday-Christianity simply does not exist. Such a cure is as anemic as the disease it seeks to remedy. If, according to Hart, mixing Christianity into the public square inevitably compromises Christianity, his own solution surely yields the same result. To quarantine the principles embedded within the Christian faith, and their application, to the church parking lot is to enervate, dis-empower, even to Gnosticize the Christian religion.

By the latter phrase we wish merely to identify the tendency toward dualism that results from limiting Christian identity, the Christian faith, and Christ's sovereignty to the institutional church in the world. This dualistic tendency can come to expression, for example, in premillennialism, a system of teaching that has little room for the active rule of our Savior-King Jesus in today's world beyond the organized church.

Jesus Christ: active in his session

The Bible teaches that after rising from the dead, Jesus Christ returned to heaven, now as the God-Man, and is seated at the Father's right hand until his return on the clouds of heaven. In Acts 2:33-36, and 5:31, the apostle Peter speaks of God exalting Christ to his right hand, a truth taught as well in Ephesians 1:20-22, Hebrews 10:12, 1 Peter 3:22, and Revelation 3:21. Between his ascension and return, "he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Cor. 15:25), though "at present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him" (Heb. 2:8).

All of this imagery speaks of power, authority, and rule given to God's Son, our Mediator, Jesus Christ. This status and position of the Second Person of the Trinity in heaven today is not the same as before the incarnation, for now he is both God and man, and as such he has accomplished the needed atonement for our sins. His office now is to apply the benefits of his finished mediatorial work, beginning with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and concluding with the consummation of all things at his return from heaven to earth. Nor does the imagery of

“sitting” at the Father’s right hand indicate a condition of passive inactivity, but denotes rather the rights and privileges of royalty.

It is worth pondering carefully the words of the Heidelberg Catechism (Lord’s Day 19, Q/A 50) regarding this session of Christ in heaven. We ⁽³⁷⁾ confess this teaching “because Christ ascended into heaven for this end, that he might there appear as Head of his Church, by whom the Father governs all things.” We acknowledge that *Christ*, whose name points to his mediatorial office, ascended into heaven, now lives in heaven as head of his church, and that through this mediator-head the Father rules all things. A non-mediatorial, church-less Second Person of the Trinity does not exist. As Second Person of the Trinity, he is now and forever will be the Mediator-Head-Father-employed-Ruler of all things in the universe.

Throughout her history the church has sought to maintain the biblical balance between acknowledging the evidence of this rule present already now in the world, and confessing that the mature and complete fullness of this rule awaits Christ’s return. In other words, the kingly rule of our Mediator-Head is present to some degree and in some dimensions, and it is future in other respects. Now the mode of this kingly rule appears to be one of modesty and suffering; later it will appear in glory and supremacy.

The chief evidence of Christ’s present rule in the world as the Mediator-Head is, of course, the institutional church. Here is where, by the promises of the gospel and the church’s own testimony, the blessings of Christ’s rule are on display. But the organized church is not the only evidence of Christ’s present rule in the world, nor should his present rule be confined to the church. By faith we may discern that through Christ the Father is answering the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer *as we Christians submit ourselves more and more to God*. Our submission to God’s will aims to be a complete, total, unified, and integrated submission—with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; all the time; in all of life.

We agree with the description of the scope of Christ’s spiritual rule in the world that Louis Berkhof championed. First, the measure of God’s rule in the hearts of sinners constitutes the realm of that rule, and the proportion of faith-obedience indicates the resulting new condition of things. “In fact,” Berkhof insisted, “if all those who are now citizens of the Kingdom would

actually obey its laws in every domain of life, the world would be so different that it would hardly be recognized” (*Systematic Theology*, p. 408). Second, this spiritual rule of our Mediator-King, though closely related to the church, is not altogether identical with the church. The citizens of the kingdom of God are those who believingly submit to Christ’s rule, whereas the field of operation, according to Berkhof, “is wider than that of the Church, since it aims at the control of life in all its manifestations” (*Systematic Theology*, p. 409).

Other voices

Dr. Hart’s proposal to keep the Christian religion and Christian faith out of the Christian’s public living is difficult to square with a number of other voices in the Reformed tradition. If Christ’s authority is as wide as life in the world, why then should not the claims of that authority be sounded equally as broadly, and submission to that authority be demonstrated just as widely?

The well-known Reformed biblical theologian, Geerhardus Vos, once wrote an essay on *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom and the Church* (1903), wherein he penned these lines: “Finally the thought of the Kingdom of God implies the subjection of the entire range of human life in all its forms and spheres to the end of religion. The Kingdom reminds us of the absoluteness, the pervasiveness, the unrestricted dominion, which of right belongs to all true religion. It proclaims that religion, and religion alone, can act as the supreme unifying, centralizing factor in the life of man, as that which binds all together and perfects it by leading it to its final goal in the service of God.”

An eminent contemporary and friend of Vos was Herman Bavinck. In the following quote from Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics*, notice the connection he draws between the nature of Christ’s kingdom in this world and the incarnation: “Christ has indeed stated that his kingdom is not of this world, but he is not a spiritual king in the sense that he has absolutely no interest in external and earthly things. On the contrary, he assumed a fully human nature and came into the world not to condemn the world but to save it. Christ planted his kingdom in that world and made sure that it could exist in it, and, like leaven, have a transforming impact in all areas of life.”

His monumental exposition of Reformed theology was not the only place where Bavinck developed the biblical understanding of the kingdom of God. Early in his career, on 3 February 1881, Bavinck presented a lecture to the Kampen theological students on “The kingdom of God, the highest good.” Midway through this lecture, Bavinck treated the subject of “The kingdom of God and the community (family, state, church, culture).” The kingdom of God is broader than the organized institutional church, Bavinck argued, because Christianity is more than worship, since it constitutes an entirely new life-power that can penetrate and enliven all spheres and forms of life. Bavinck argued,

“Thus it is that we speak of a Christian society, a Christian school; there is nothing human that cannot be called Christian. Everything within and beyond the church that is enlivened and governed by Christ, who exercises sovereignty over all things, contributes to and belongs to the kingdom ^{38} of God” (pp. 46-47).

Over against this cosmic portrait sketched by Bavinck and his contemporaries, Hart and his friends seek to persuade us of “the reduced character of Christ’s sovereignty in the Christian era.”

In contrast to the “first way” of theonomy/Christian Reconstruction, the “second way” of religious secularism seems committed to an “under-realized” eschatology—by which we mean that in terms of the “now-not yet” character of Christ’s sovereign rule, it shortchanges, and arbitrarily seeks to limit, the claims of our Mediator-King Jesus in the life of believers in the world today. Keep in mind, for later discussion, the distinction between *how* Christ rules the activities of unbelievers and those of believers, on the one hand, and *that* he does in fact rule all activities of unbelievers and believers sovereignly in the world today. The “third way” assumes *that* Christ’s rule in the world as Mediator-Head is real, effective, and cosmic—and therefore Christians living in the world need to demonstrate their whole-life submission to that rule.