



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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Lord's Day 48 - November 30, 2008

122 **Q.** *What does the second request mean?*

A. *Your kingdom come* means, Rule us by your Word and Spirit in such a way that more and more we submit to you. Keep your church strong, and add to it. Destroy the devil's work; destroy every force which revolts against you and every conspiracy against your Word. Do this until your kingdom is so complete and perfect that in it you are all in all.

In commenting on this second request of the Lord's Prayer, John Calvin begins with an unusual claim: "This contains nothing new..." Strange as it sounds, Calvin is right. Once we've prayed for God's name to be hallowed, have we not also prayed for his kingdom to come (and his will to be done for that matter)? Where God's name is set apart as holy, his commands will be obeyed and his reign will be acknowledged.

Of course, Calvin goes on to say that because of our "lethargy" in spiritual matters, it is good to pray "your kingdom come" as well as "hallowed be your name." And in truth, the second petition carries a different nuance than the first. The first request concerns God's honor; the second has to do with God's rule.

Rule us by your Word and Spirit in such a way that more and more we submit to you. The kingdom has come where the King has his way. The kingdom is a hot topic in Christian circles today. Young people in particular are full of ideas for bringing the kingdom and building the kingdom and engaging in kingdom work. Usually, their ideas are heartfelt and meant to help people. But we must not think the kingdom of God is primarily a new order of society. That was the mistake of the Jews in Jesus' day. They did not understand that you must be born again to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5), or that without holiness no one will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:10). Faith and repentance, and the godly life that follows in their wake, are unchangeable requirements for membership in the kingdom. We aren't just out to refurbish some morals or

intervene in global crises. We want to live like Christ, show people Christ, and make a difference for Christ, but also call people to renounce their rebellion against God, flee worldliness, and be ready to meet the King when he returns to finally establish his kingdom in its full.

The kingdom is for those who love the King. That's why the Heidelberg Catechism has us pray for the work of the Word and the Spirit. We want the Holy Spirit to work through the Bible and the preaching of God's word so that men, women, and children would lay down their arms, quell their daily insurrections, and surrender to the one who has rightful authority over us. God is not interested in making good people apart from making us glory people. That is to say, the kingdom is not about excellence in behavior. It's about our willing submission to God and living a life of love that befits those who belong to such a lovely King.

Keep your church strong, and add to it. If we love Christ, we will love his bride and pray for her. There is nothing more important in all the world for the fulfillment of God's plans and the spread of his glory than strong churches. And yet, there are so many ways the church is weak. She is often doctrinally compromised and theologically uninformed. She suffers at times from poor planning, paltry vision, and lack of follow through. She can be loveless, listless, and indifferent to the needs of others. She is torn apart by schism, heresies, and persecution. Too often, she is in desperate need of godly leadership and faithful preach-

ing. Some churches are all style and no substance. Other churches are ready to close their doors for want of money and members. There are legalistic churches, shallow churches, mean churches, lazy churches, and worldly churches. Amidst so much weakness, every Christian should plead with God, “Keep your church strong.”

And add to it. Zacharias Ursinus, commenting on Lord’s Day 48, argues that the kingdom comes in four ways: by the preaching of the gospel, by progress in holiness, by the final glorification of the church, and by conversion. It is thoroughly Reformed and Calvinistic for us to pray for the salvation of the lost. True, the Heidelberg Catechism does not have a well-developed doctrine of mission or evangelism, but in texts like this we get glimpses of the reformers’ heart for conversion. As the old hymn says, “we long to see your churches full, that all the chosen race, may with one voice and heart and soul, sing your redeeming grace.”

Destroy the devil’s work; destroy every force which revolts against you and every conspiracy against your Word. The kingdom of God is where God our King reigns and rules, where his enemies are put in subjection under his feet. Thus, in praying for the kingdom to come, we must pray for the conquering of Christ’s enemies. We are not praying a namby-pamby prayer for niceness to take over the world. We are asking God to subdue his enemies, vanquish his foes, and destroy every power which rises in opposition to Christ and his word. As Calvin puts it, “God sets up his kingdom by humbling the world.”

It bears mentioning at this point that the kingdom and the church are not identical. The relationship between the two is complex. If the Reformers, steeped as they were in Christendom, tended to equate the two, self-proclaimed reformers in our day tend to separate the two as if the church could be forgotten in our attempts to build the kingdom. George Ladd, the preeminent evangelical scholar on the kingdom in the last 50 years, differentiated among five aspects to the relationship between the kingdom and the church: the church is not the kingdom; the kingdom creates the church; the church gives witness to the kingdom; the church acts as the instrument of the kingdom; and the church acts as custodian of the kingdom. This means that the coming kingdom (God’s increasing reign and rule) is not confined to the church, but the citizens of the kingdom are. It also means that our prayer for the

kingdom to come is not only a prayer for the strength of the church but for the spread of righteousness, justice, grace, and submission to God’s word in the world.

Do this until your kingdom is so complete and perfect that in it you are all in all. This little concluding line can guard us from serious error. Theologians like to talk of the “already and the not yet” of the kingdom. That is, the kingdom has been inaugurated, but it has not been fully established. So Jesus can announce the kingdom of God is in the midst of you (Luke 17:21) and also instruct us to pray that the kingdom would come (Matt. 6:10). It has arrived and is still arriving. The kingdom is already here, but not yet complete and perfect. This means, on one hand, we should not think of the kingdom of God as Christ’s millennial reign sometime in the future. And on the other hand, we should not expect the kingdom to exist among us now in a utopian world of peace and brotherly love. An “already and not yet” understanding of the kingdom gives us hope for improvement in the world, tempered by a realism that acknowledges the continuing presence of sin, enmity, and rebellion.

One final note: we should be careful with our verbs when talking about the kingdom. We often talk of building the kingdom, bringing the kingdom, or expanding the kingdom. I know what Christians mean by this language. They want us to engage in work that helps the world more closely approximate God’s design. But the verbs used in the New Testament are more passive. We are given the kingdom, brought into the kingdom, or inherit the kingdom. We announced, receive, and enter into the kingdom, just as the Israelites entered into and inherited the Promised Land. No doubt, God uses us for kingdom purposes. But it’s striking that we are not commanded to build the kingdom, but to pray that the kingdom would come. Praying for the kingdom, it seems, is the best work we can do to speed its coming.

~ Written by Kevin DeYoung