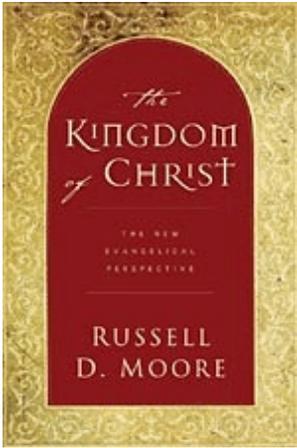


Moving Forward with a Kingdom Consensus



Russel D. Moore serves as Dean of the School of Theology and Senior Vice President for Academic Administration of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He served as the first Executive Director of the Carl F. H. Henry Institute of Evangelical Engagement.

CROSSWAY BOOKS: Describe the theological trend that you see developing.

RUSSELL MOORE: Evangelicals have stopped fighting about the Kingdom of God. In the early days of the American evangelical movement, leaders such as Carl Henry wondered how evangelicals could ever form a coherent theology when they couldn't agree on the central message of the Bible—the Kingdom of God in Christ. At the time, an evangelical Kingdom theology seemed hopeless. Dispensationalists of the Scofield Bible strain argued that the Kingdom was future—with some of them even denying the contemporary relevance of the Lord's Prayer or the Beatitudes. Reformed theologians spoke of the Kingdom in predominantly spiritual terms—as either the reign of Jesus in the believer's heart or as the hope of heaven in the life to come.

This book explores how a Kingdom consensus among evangelicals led to their renewed engagement in social and political arenas.

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This has changed remarkably. A coherent Kingdom theology has emerged within the two primary theological streams of conservative American Protestantism—Reformed theology and dispensationalism. Reformed theology is now taking seriously the earthly, material aspects of redemption, articulating a more biblical understanding of the Christian hope as cosmic transformation. The leading dispensationalist theologians no longer speak of the church as a "parenthesis" in the plan of God. They no longer so sharply divide between God's purposes for Israel and his purposes for the church. Evangelicals of virtually all traditions now recognize the Kingdom revealed in Scripture as both "already" realized in the present era and "not yet" with a consummation yet to come.

CROSSWAY BOOKS: What kind of Kingdom is envisioned?

RUSSELL MOORE: The Kingdom itself is described in Scripture as a strikingly political reality. There is a reason, after all, that Herod was "troubled" when he was told of the birth of the Messiah (Matt 2:3). Herod's fears were premature, but they were not ill-founded. Herod wasn't troubled by the possibility of Jesus' kingship over an eternal choir practice in the heavenly places. He was threatened by one promised as "king of the Jews"—the prophesied anointed One who would defeat all of Israel's enemies and inherit the throne of his ancestor David (2 Sam 7:10-16; Ps 89:20-37). This Davidic king would inherit not just a tract of land in Palestine but the "ends of the earth" (Ps 2:7). This reign would not be otherworldly, but would mean the transformation of this present cosmos into the dwelling-place of God, with the creation restored to its primeval glory with its rightful kings and queens—human beings—ruling over it (Gen 1:26-30; Ps 8:4-8).

CROSSWAY BOOKS: But what about the criticism that Christians are so focused on future renewal that they neglect current problems?

RUSSELL MOORE: Seeking first the Kingdom should not dampen Christian concern for social and political justice, but heighten it. After all, the priorities of the King—seen in his ultimate goal at the restoration of the creation—must become the priorities of the Kingdom colony, the church. We see something of this principle in the New Testament when James confronts the churches for their economic injustices. He does not simply appeal to timeless truths about partiality, but instead indicts the church for a defective eschatology. In the same way, the priorities of the eschatological Kingdom must transform the priorities of our churches—including the ways we think about culture and politics. If the messianic kingdom is marked by "pity on the weak and the needy" whose lives are threatened by "oppression and violence" (Ps 72:12), then how can the church ignore the "unwanted children" languishing in Russian orphanages or "invalids" wasting away in lonely nursing homes? If the coming Kingdom is marked by a King who judges with fairness and equity (Isa 11:3-4), then how can the believing community be silent in the face of judicial abuse of power? If the Kingdom is ruled by believers from every tribe and nation (Rev 5:9-10), then how can Christians stand by while some of the cosmos's future rulers are denied justice because of the pigment of their skin? If the Kingdom will mean the restoration of the material creation under the rule of human beings, then how can Christians fall into the extremist positions of either side of the environmental movement—seeing the natural order as a resource to be exploited carelessly or seeing humanity as a parasite on the earth? If the Kingdom—both in the creation and in the new creation—shows that human purpose is found in creative labor, then how can evangelicals be surprised when a welfare state leads to despair seen in crime, family breakdown, drugs, and alcohol abuse?

Perhaps most pertinent to the current era, evangelicals must understand what the biblical vision of the Kingdom teaches us about the essential goodness of life itself. Abortion, euthanasia, and other assaults on innocent life are not just liberal and they are not just mean. They are part of an ongoing guerilla insurgency against the image of the Creator himself. When we plead in the public square for the sanctity of human life, we are saying something that we learn from the Kingdom we will see in our own resurrections from the grave—that life is better than death because the gospel is more glorious than the curse.

CROSSWAY BOOKS: Among evangelicals, what do you see as the result of a non-cohesive Kingdom theology?

RUSSELL MOORE: Evangelical theologies of the Kingdom have led to two polar opposite approaches to political engagement: withdrawal or triumphalism. One side persistently calls on evangelicals to withdraw from the public square and prepare for the coming of Christ. It beckons evangelicals to an alternative universe of evangelical sub-culture—a "Bizarro America" where evangelicals have our own distinctly Christian popular culture, complete with Christian boy bands, Christian cartoon television networks, and Christian romance novels. On the other hand, some evangelicals have spoken as though America could be "claimed" for Christ through enacting "Christian" political legislation—complete with a "Christian" view on everything from congressional term limits to the line item veto. These evangelicals have often vested political processes with so much hope that they are befuddled when political victories fail to stem the tide of the sexual revolution or the abortion culture.

Both evangelical withdrawal and evangelical triumphalism must be measured against a biblical vision of the Kingdom of God—a Kingdom the New Testament tells us is both "already" and "not yet," present and yet future. The Kingdom informs us about what our priorities should be—personally, socially, and politically—and also tempers our expectations about what kind of change we can see, and where we can expect to see it. Accordingly, an evangelical Kingdom theology ought to reorient the way we think about both the church business meeting and the Iowa caucuses.

CROSSWAY BOOKS: How does this phenomenon impact local church work?

RUSSELL MOORE: It recovers the church, not the individual or the nation-state, as the primary focus of God's Kingdom activity in the present era (Eph 1:22-23). This means that the most important political reality of all is not the local voter precinct or the White House reception room, but the creaky pews of the local congregation. A renewed Kingdom theology can remind evangelical churches that they are indeed "joint heirs with Christ" (Rom 8:17), the rulers of the universe—but not yet (1 Cor 6:3). Our most pressing political issue, then, is the rule of Christ over his church as a signpost of the Kingdom to come. This means we should see preaching, spiritual gifts, the Lord's Supper, baptism, congregational membership, and church discipline as, in one sense, "political"—because they are mirroring before the watching world the makeup and priority of the eschatological Kingdom.

Having a Kingdom vision within the local church also means that we allow the Kingdom to inform what we value within the church. If the hope of the Kingdom is not just the beatific vision but a restored cosmos and a reenergized cultural mandate, then we should value all of the vocations of the church as of eternal value—not just the preaching of the gospel. The truck driver and the investment banker on the third pew from the back are not working simply so that they can have opportunities to witness and to pool their tithes to support missionaries. Their work is an aspect of discipleship, preparing them for the day when they will work as rulers of the cosmos under the headship of Christ.

This also means that our Kingdom vision ought to order the makeup of our congregations, just as it did to the Jewish/Gentile churches of Ephesus, Rome, and Galatia. If in the eschaton the Kingdom is multi-national and multi-ethnic, then why are our churches divided along lines of race and economic class? The very makeup of our churches ought to challenge the identity politics of the present era, and announce that a new day is coming.

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