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How Jesus Inaugurated the Kingdom on the Cross: a Kingdom Perspective of the Atonement

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I Introduction: Connecting Cross and Kingdom

The ongoing debates about the gospel's core message[1] and theories of atonement[2] provide an ideal moment to explore a truly foundational issue which, I believe, lies at the intersection of many of these discussions. It concerns the relation between the kingdom of God and the cross of Christ.

While orthodox Christian faith has always affirmed *that* God's redemptive rule on earth was —in some decisive way— inaugurated by the sacrificial death of Jesus, Christian theology has not satisfactorily explained *how* this was accomplished. Theories of the atonement have certainly highlighted central aspects of the instrumentality of the cross for human salvation, but they do not relate explicitly to the kingdom of God. As a result, the conversations attempting to relate Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom and Paul's expositions of the cross continue to run in entrenched—even mutually apprehensive—circles, without the desired meeting of minds.

J. I. Packer, for example, has acknowledged that

> In recent years, great strides in biblical theology and contemporary canonical exegesis have brought new precision to our grasp of the Bible's overall story of how God's plan to bless Israel, and through Israel the world, came to a climax in and through Christ.[3]

However, Packer has located the central message of the NT in terms of Luther's quest for personal redemption, and therefore cautioned,

> And to the extent that modern developments, by filling our horizon with the great metanarrative, distract us from pursuing Luther's question in personal terms, they hinder as well as help in our appreciation of the gospel.[4]

Responding to Packer's ambivalence, Christopher Wright has stated,

> I simply fail to see how gaining the widest possible biblical perspective, from the whole biblical narrative, can hinder our appreciation of the gospel—unless it is accompanied by denial of the personal and substitutionary nature of Christ's death…[5]

He goes on to say,

> But I am disturbed that it is possible for the reverse to happen—namely, that some theologians and preachers are so obsessed with the penal substitutionary understanding of the cross that they either ignore or seem scarcely aware of the total biblical story in which it is set and the vast cosmic and creational dimensions of the cross that the New Testament itself also spells out so clearly.[6]

What we need is a clearer perception of how Jesus inaugurated the kingdom on the cross, which would enable us to understand better the gospel's integral content and the atonement's kaleidoscopic images.

The point of this essay is to propose that the Scriptures do provide us with a consistent narrative, with its own coherent logic, of how the death of Christ brings about God's acknowledged rule, which accomplishes his redemption and judgement upon his creation. We may call it a kingdom perspective of the atonement, as it holds as its basic premise that Christ's atoning work can be most meaningfully articulated in terms of the kingdom of God, as the culmination of the whole biblical narrative of Israel and the nations, in and through Christ. This I believe is the non-negotiable vantage point for understanding the atonement.

1 See D. A. Carson, 'What Is the Gospel?—Revisited' in Sam Storms and Justin Taylor (Eds.), *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper* (Wheaton, IL: Crossways, 2010), 147-170; Kevin de Young and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Crossways, 2011); Justin Taylor, 'The Relationship between "the Gospel of the Kingdom", "the Gospel of the Cross"', accessible at: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2012/09/03/the-relationship-between-the-gospel-of-the-kingdom-and-the-gospel-of-the-cross/>; Scott McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids, IL: Zondervan, 2011); N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (NY: HarperOne, 2012).

2 See James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Eds.), *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006) and Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, Justin Thacker (Gen. Eds.), *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement 2006* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

3 J. I. Packer, 'Introduction: Penal Substitution Revisited' in J. I. Packer and Mark Dever, *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 26. Quoted in Christopher J. H. Wright, *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 156 (fn. 1).

4 Packer, *In My Place*, 27.

5 Wright, *The God I Don't Understand*, 156, fn. 1.

6 Wright, *The God I Don't Understand*, 156-7, fn. 1.

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II A Kingdom Perspective of the Atonement

1. Schema

The proposed perspective may be outlined quite simply as follows:

- In covenantal terms, a kingdom (*basileia* understood as 'rule' or 'reign') is constituted by the relationship between two parties: a king and a citizenry. One without the other is not a kingdom in that sense.
- Jesus brings about God's acknowledged rule on earth by simultaneously fulfilling, in his own person, God's requirements of perfect king and perfect citizen.
- Christ becomes the God-approved king by proving his love for his subjects to the fullest extent by his self-sacrifice for their rescue and restoration. He proves his God-approved citizenship by becoming obedient to his Sovereign to the fullest extent by submitting completely to his authority and demonstrating his loyalty in the face of creaturely (satanic and human) usurpation, rebellion and compromise.
- Jesus accomplishes this supremely on the cross because it is by the kind of death he suffered that both the love (for fallen creation) and obedience (to his sovereign Lord) which he had consistently demonstrated throughout his life and ministry, reach their climactic result.
- Therefore, by fulfilling both requirements of perfect king and perfect citizen, in his own person, on the cross, to God's fullest satisfaction, Jesus inaugurates God's redemptive rule on earth, recapitulating and reconstituting a new covenant community around his own mediatory personhood. He then invites repentant sinners to enter into that new sphere of communion with the triune God for their restoration to him and the redemption of all creation.

2. Theological antecedents

Each component of this perspective is entirely unoriginal. They have venerable antecedents spanning the length of church history. For example, the covenantal shape of God's engagement with creation is one of the greatest recoveries of the Reformed tradition.[7] The essentially political nature of God's mission is persuasively argued by Oliver O'Donovan.[8] The constituent elements of a kingdom were most notably proposed by Alexander Campbell, who posited not two but five elements:

> What then are the essential elements of a kingdom as existing among men? They are five, viz.: King, Constitution, Subjects, Laws, and Territory. Such are the essential parts of every political kingdom, perfect in its kind, now existing on earth… Although the constitution is first, in the order of nature, of all the elements of a kingdom, (for it makes one man a king and the rest subjects,) yet we cannot imagine a constitution in reference to a kingdom, without a king and subjects. In speaking of them in detail, we cannot then speak of any one of them: as existing without the others—we must regard them as correlates, and as coming into existence contemporaneously.[9]

More recently, Graeme Goldsworthy proposed a simpler model: 'There is a King who rules, a people who are ruled, and a sphere where this rule is recognized as taking place.'[10] That Jesus is the perfect or ideal king has been acknowledged, of course, from NT times; but lately substantiated by such scholars as Jamie Grant[11] and Julien Smith.[12] That Jesus fulfilled the ideal of Israelite covenant citizenship was argued most notably by T. W. Manson.[13] Summarizing his view of how the cross and kingdom are connected, N. T. Wright states that

> God himself will come to the place of pain and horror, of suffering and even death, so that **somehow** he can take it upon himself *and thereby set up his new style theocracy at last*. The evangelists tell the story of Jesus in such a way that this combination of Israel's vocation and the divine purpose come together perfectly into one.[14]

This proposal seeks to articulate what that undefined 'somehow' entailed.

That Jesus unifies many salvific roles in his person and work, traditionally categorized as the *munus triplex* of priest, prophet and king, was suggested by Eusebius[15] and famously elaborated on by Calvin.[16] That Jesus brought the kingdom into being by being the kingdom as *autobasileia* (self-kingdom) was an insight of Origen's that the church endorsed.[17] More recently, Carl F. H. Henry gave fresh articulation to the idea, stating,

> Jesus in his own person is the embodied sovereignty of God. He lives out that sovereignty in the flesh. He manifests the kingdom of God by enthroning the creation-will of God and demonstrating his lordship over Satan. Jesus conducts himself as Lord and true King, ruling over demons, ruling over nature at its fiercest, ruling over sickness, conquering death itself. With the coming of Jesus the kingdom is not merely immanent; it gains the larger scope of incursion and invasion.[18]

Hans Boersma has carefully examined the emphases of divine violence (against the evil powers) and divine hospitality (for excluded sinners) in

7 J. I. Packer, 'On Covenant Theology', *Celebrating the Saving Work of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998).

8 Oliver O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996).

9 Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System*, (4th ed., Cincinnati: H.S. Bosworth, 1867), 148.

10 Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1981), 47.

11 Jamie Grant, *The King as Exemplar: the Function of Deuteronomy's Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms* (Atlanta: SBL, 2004).

12 Julien Smith, *Christ the Ideal King: Cultural Context, Rhetorical Strategy, and the Power of Divine Monarchy in Ephesians* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

13 T. W. Manson, T*he Teaching of Jesus: Its Form and Content* (Cambridge: CUP, 1935), 227-28.

14 N. T. Wright, *How God Became King* (London: SPCK/ NY: HarperOne, 2012), 196 (original italics, bold type mine).

15 *Ecclesiastical History*, I.3.

16 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.15.

17 *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 14.7.

18 Carl F. H. Henry, 'Reflections on the Kingdom of God', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35:1 (March 1992), 42.

the historical theologies of the atonement, and commends the metaphor of hospitality as 'the soil in which the various models of the atonement can take root and flourish'.[19] He further concludes that 'God's hospitality is like the soil in which the process of reconciliation is able to take root and flourish'.[20] Accordingly, God's hospitality is the distinct characteristic of his redemptive rule.

Therefore, any newness in the present schema is due entirely to the way these affirmations have been aligned.

a) Kingdom as king and citizens

As the late R.T. France helpfully reminded,

> 'the kingdom of God' is not making a statement about a 'thing' called 'the kingdom,' but about *God*, that he is king. Thus, 'the kingdom of God has come near' means 'God is taking over as king,' and to 'enter the kingdom of God' is to come under his rule, to accept him as king.[21]

This theocracy, though, is covenantal in nature, a pledge between king and subjects, enunciated repeatedly in Scripture by the 'covenant formula': 'I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God' (Ex 6:7; elaborated in 19:5-6; cf. Lev 26:12; Deut 29:12-13). The other components of Israel's nationhood such as territory (eg. Lev 18: 24-28; 25:23), laws (eg. Deut 4:5-8) and institutions (eg. Deut 17:8-20), though necessary, were entirely contingent upon and derived from the primary relationship between king and subjects.

The bipartite covenant formula is evoked extensively in the prophetic tradition (eg. Jer 7:23; 11:4: 30:22; Ezek 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:23, 27; etc.). The promised 'new covenant' was framed in these same relational terms (Jer 31:33; cf. 24:7; 32:38), and is explicitly instituted as such by Jesus at the Last Supper (Lk 22:15-20). The bipartite formula is used also to foretell the inclusion of those formerly excluded (Hos 1:9-10 and 2:23), and appropriated in the NT in reference to the full citizenship of Gentiles in Christ's kingdom (Rom 9:25-26; 1 Pet 2:9-10).

OT historiography too assumes that a kingdom was held together by the mutual acknowledgement of king and subjects. Israel's demand for a human king (1 Sam 8:7), introduced the new factor of that human king's relationship with, and representation of, his Divine King. This was the basis of Saul's rejection (1 Sam 13:14) and David's confirmation (2 Sam 5:12). This is most plainly evident when 'Jehoiada then made a covenant between the Lord and the king and people that they would be the Lord's people. He also made a covenant between the king and the people' (2 Kgs 11:17).

The extended metaphor about Israel's shepherds and sheep (eg. Jer 23:1-4 and Ezek 34) reflects the same bipartite combination. It is encapsulated by the proverb, 'A large population is a king's glory, but without subjects a prince is ruined' (Prov 14:28; cf. 20:8). The same assumption lies behind Jesus' rebuttal that 'If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand', which was made in response to the Pharisees' accusation that 'By the prince of the demons he casts out the demons' (Mk 3:22-24). Therefore, that a kingdom consists of a king and a citizenry is a demonstrably biblical idea.

19 Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 18.

20 Boersma, *Violence*, 112.

21 R. T. France, 'Kingdom of God', in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, et al (eds.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic/London, SPCK), 420 (original emphasis).

b) Jesus as perfect king

While all the Gospels announce Jesus' kingship, the *connection* between his royal function and his death is most poignantly highlighted in John.[22] Mark narrates that when Jesus saw the crowd, 'he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd' (6:34); Matthew adds the explanation, 'because they were harassed and helpless' (9:36). In John, Jesus assumes the heroic role of the 'good shepherd' (10:11a, 14) in damning contrast to the thief who 'comes only to kill and steal and destroy' (10), and the hired hand who 'runs away because [he] does not care for the sheep' (13). The self-sacrificial defence of the sheep is presented as the natural and definitive test of the role: 'The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep' (11b).

The voluntary nature of Jesus' self-sacrifice in loving obedience to the Father is obviously important for the narrator. The point is repeatedly made:

> And I lay down my life for the sheep… For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father (15, 17-18).

The OT background of Yahweh's promised judgement against Israel's cruel and self-serving 'shepherds' and his intervention through the provision of a Davidic 'shepherd' (Jer 23:1-6; Ezek 34; 37:24-28; Zech 9-14) constitute the unmistakable and directly relevant context of Jesus' explanation of his ministry to 'seek and save the lost' who have drifted away from covenant faithfulness (Lk 19:10; cf. 5:31-32; 15:4-7 and parallels). More relevantly, the 'shepherd of Yahweh' texts informed Jesus' understanding of the *extent* to which this contrastive way of ruling will be required of him:

> You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, *even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Mt 20:25-28 = Mk 10:42-45).

At the beginning of the Passover narrative, John connects Jesus' love for the disciples and his impending death when we are told that 'Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them *to the end*' (13:1). Finally, in the Upper Room Discourse, the test of love in death is most clearly stated: 'No one

22 For a recent treatment of this nexus see Mavis M. Leung, *The Kingship-Cross Interplay in the Gospel of John: Jesus' Death as Corroboration of His Royal Messiahship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends' (15:13).

The counter-intuitive manifestation of God's/Christ's love for, and redemption of, sinners is expressed in the Pauline epistles. The efficacy of Christ's sacrificial love is described collectively as

> For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us (Rom 5:6-8).

It is also described personally as, 'And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20; cf. 1:4). Christ's death is also described as an act of love for humanity as well as devotion to God: 'as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God' (Eph 5:2).

The Revelation begins with the assurance that Christ 'loves us and… has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father. To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen' (1:5a-6). It goes on to acclaim the Lamb's universal authority as achieved by his self-sacrifice:

> Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.
>
> … Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing! (5:9-10, 12).

Jesus' amalgamation of the exalted 'Son of Man' of Daniel 7 and the suffering-and-vindicated 'Servant' of Isaiah in his prediction that 'the son of man must suffer many things…' (Lk 9:22; cf. 24:7; Mk 9:12) reveals his self-understanding of this complex role. The enthronement of 'the one like a son of man' to whom is given 'dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him' (Dan 7:13-14, 27) is an entirely triumphant vision, with no hint of suffering. Such claims as, 'All things have been handed over to me by the Father' (Mt 11:27; cf. Jn 3:35; 13:3; 17:2), 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' (Mt 28:18), and 'He has given him authority to execute judgement because he is the Son of Man' (Jn 5:27), all go back to Daniel 7, and perhaps to certain Royal Psalms (2, 110, 118, etc.).

As evident in his prayer in John 17:4-5, Jesus appears to have fully understood that serving his appointed mission to bring God glory on earth will necessarily entail humiliation and death but will, with equal certainty, lead to his own glorification. Philippians 2:6-11 is a remarkable synthesis of this *anabasis-katabasis* (descent and ascent) movement, whereby Jesus becomes the perfect king by being the self-emptying servant.

c) Jesus as perfect citizen

The OT presents several virtue lists and character vignettes that illustrate God's expectations of an 'ideal Israelite' (eg. Deut 10:12-19; 1 Sam 2:26; Job 29, 31; Ps 1, 15, 24, 112; Is 66:2; Jer 22:3; Ezek 18:5-9; Mich 6:8, Zech 7: 9-10, etc.). Such godly dispositions as righteousness (*tsĕdāqâ*), justice (*mišpāt*), mercy (*hesed*), love (*ahabah*), faithfulness (*emunah*), and the 'fear of the Lord' (*yir'at YHWH*) are upheld in every genre of OT writing. The ideal covenant citizen was one who demonstrated these qualities in ordinary and extraordinary situations out of wholehearted loyalty to *Yahweh* and the community. Therefore, to love *Yahweh* with one's entire being (Deut 6:4-5) and one's neighbour as oneself (Lev19:18b) became the epitome of *torah*-obedience, transcending even the sacrificial cult.[23]

When a scribe once agreed with Jesus that 'to love [God] with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices', Mark witnesses that 'Jesus saw that he answered wisely, [and] said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God"' (12:28-34). It is also remarkable that Nathaniel, whom Jesus recognized as 'an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit' (John 1:47) is the very first disciple to declare his recognition of Jesus as '… the King of Israel!' (49).

The first petition of the 'Lord's Prayer' is arguably the simplest and clearest NT definition of the kingdom of God: '…Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' (Mt 6:10). Jesus repeatedly stated that doing God's will was the all-embracing purpose of his life and mission. 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work' (Jn 4:34; see also 5:30; 6:38; 8:26; 9:4; 10:37-38; 12:49-50; 14:31; 15:10; 17:4). At the beginning of his public ministry, when Satan 'showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory', this was the very thing that Jesus had come to accomplish. The critical factor was how and for whom he would accomplish it.

Therefore, to Satan's conditional offer, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me', Jesus is resolute in his response: 'Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve"' (Mt 4:8-10; para. Lk 4:5-8; citing Deut 6:13). At the end, the same resolve carried him through the most agonizing decision of his incarnate life: 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will… My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done' (Mt 26:39,42 para. Lk 22:42).

Therefore, when NT writers explain the instrumentality of Jesus' death (from the perspective of his human participation), they consistently identify his creaturely obedience as the turning point.

> Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's *obedience* the many will be made righteous (Rom 5:18-19)
>
> …but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born

23 For citations in Intertestamental Jewish literature see 'Mark 12:29-31' in *Commentary on the NT Use of the OT*, eds. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 219.

> in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming *obedient to the point of death*, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name… (Phil 2:7-9).
>
> In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned *obedience* through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek (Heb 5:7-10).

When pressed to explain the instrumentality of the cross, John Calvin stated,

> Now someone asks, how has Christ abolished sin, banished the separation between us and God, and acquired righteousness to render God favorable and kindly toward us. To this we can in general reply that he has achieved this for us by *the whole course of his obedience*.[24]

Christ's perfect compassion was the decisive factor of his kingly intervention. His perfect obedience was the decisive factor of his submission to God's rule as the true citizen. The kingdom is established by the unique combination of these two critical factors embodied and enacted by Christ, and climactically manifested on the cross.

Yet there is much *communicatio idiomatum* between the categories of king and citizen. According to the Deuteronomic ideal, the king *is* the ideal citizen, diligently studying the *torah* for the sake of his fellow Israelites (Deut 17:14-20). In performing his kingly role Jesus was ever conscious of his subordination to the Father and his royal mission being one of obediently carrying out the Father's mandate (Jn 5:19; 14:10b, 31; 12:49-50; 15:10, etc.). On the other hand, as we shall see, the Israelite citizen was ethically inculcated *inter alia* in the royal paradigm. To be of Adamic descent, bearing the image of God, was to participate in the rule over creation (Ps 8). Therefore, although the proposed schema is easily comprehensible, it preserves the mystery of the atonement. If anything, it takes us deeper into it.

III Implications of the Kingdom Perspective

So how does a kingdom perspective of the cross account for the diversity of salvation images in the NT? How does it relate to traditional theories of atonement? How does it define the core message of the gospel?

1. The kingdom and salvation images

A kingdom perspective of the atonement is able to account for the variety of salvation metaphors employed by Jesus himself as recorded by the Evangelists and by the other NT writers. This is because these images reflect the multiplicity of functions inherent in Christ's roles as king and citizen.

24 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II.xvi.5 (emphasis mine).

As the late Waldemar Janzen convincingly demonstrated, the OT offered ethical 'paradigms' modelled on identifiable community functions such as priest (priestly), sage (sapiential), king (royal), prophet (prophetic), and kinsman-redeemer (familial), for the moral formation of ordinary Israelites.[25] A covenant citizen was thereby oriented to act instinctively in the spirit of the *torah* in any given situation. Jesus' perfect covenant citizenship was demonstrated in his unique excellence of fulfilling these ethical paradigms.

Here the 'offices' traditionally assigned to Jesus must be expanded to include the fuller range of community functions in scripture. To the *munus triplex* of priest, prophet and king (which includes the functions of 'judge' and 'warrior') need to be added the categories of wisdom-teacher[26] and kinsman-redeemer.[27] Others such as exorcist and charismatic miracle-worker, could be understood as belonging to a particular prophetic tradition (i.e. of Elijah and Elisha).[28]

Jesus uniquely exemplified the priestly paradigm of holiness and mediation towards God.[29] His incarnation of God's holy presence among his suffering people transcended the holiness of both Temple and priesthood (Mt 12:1-8). The most explicit identification in the NT to Jesus' priestly function is his High Priesthood in the Order of Melchizedek as expounded in Hebrews 5:6 and 7:1-17 (citing Ps 110:4). Jesus is upheld as superior to the Levitical high priesthood because he is empathetic yet sinless (Heb 4:15), made perfect in obedience (5:8-10), and forever accessible (7:23-25). But most supremely Jesus transcends the priestly paradigm by becoming the perfect atoning sacrifice *himself* (9:11-14, 26; 10:19-31; 12:14-17; 13:1-17).

While it was always understood that obedience *is* the perfect sacrifice (1 Sam 15:22; Ps 40:6-8 (quoted and expounded in Heb 10:4-10); 50:9-15; 51:16-17; Prov 21:3; Ecc 5:1; Is 1:11-17; Jer 7:21-24; Hos 6:6 (quoted in Mt 9:13 and 12:7); Mich 6:6-8; Mk 12:33; Rom 12:1) only Jesus was capable of perfect obedience, and therefore, offer in himself *the* perfect sacrifice. The connection between Jesus' sacrifice of perfect obedience and the receiving of kingship is clearly made in Hebrews:

> But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God,

25 Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994). I am grateful to Dr. Chris Wright for introducing me to this book.

26 See Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2000).

27 See D. A. Leggett, *The Levirate and Go'el Institutions in the Old Testament with Special Attention to the Book of Ruth* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack, 1974); Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., 'The Go'el in Ancient Israel: Theological Reflections on an Israelite Institution', *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 1 (1991), 3-19.

28 See for example, Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1973); Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), and *Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1993), etc.

29 See Gerald O'Collins SJ and Michael Keenan Jones, *Jesus Our Priest: A Christian Approach to the Priesthood of Christ* (Oxford: OUP, 2012).

> waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified (10:12-14).

The prophetic paradigm was more overtly part of Jesus' self-understanding (eg. Mk 6:4 para; Mt 23:37-39, para.; Lk 13:33). That Jesus was the 'prophet like Moses' predicted in Deuteronomy 18:15-18 is affirmed in John 6:14; 7:52; Acts 3:22 and 7:37. The prophets were ideal Israelites because they not only kept covenant themselves, but called their fellow citizens back to repentant reconciliation with God and righteous responsibility towards their weaker neighbours. Their loyalty to God, demonstrated in subversive words and actions, often ran the gauntlet of public scorn and state retribution.

However, Jesus saw his own impending suffering as more than that of an exemplary prophetic martyr. He repeatedly claims for himself the enigmatic role of the Isaianic suffering servant, whose faithfulness not only leads to suffering (all too familiar), but whose suffering is substitutionary and leads to the restoration of the unfaithful (utterly astonishing!). Isaiah 52:13-53:12 reports how the one whom God calls 'my servant' bears the punishment of sins upon himself in suffering and death, and in his 'resurrection' bringing forth the forgiveness and restoration of the guilty. What the Good Shepherd is to the royal paradigm, the Suffering Servant is to the prophetic.

In the category of wisdom-teacher, Jesus' public ministry provides ample examples of his creative and didactic efforts to alert ordinary people to God's decisive new initiative of grace.[30] His own experience was something like that of Job, facing the incredulity and accusations of those who should have known better. His 'fear of the Lord' was tested in the Qoheleth-like crucible of seeming futility, and the Job-like crucible of seeming abandonment.

Psalm 22 with its cry, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' (1) is not technically a 'wisdom psalm', but it voiced the existential anguish of the righteous in a cynical world well enough to become the most quoted psalm in the Gospels. In it the faithful sufferer complains, 'All who see me mock me… "He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!'" (6-8). The psalm concludes with a hopeful declaration of God's rule over the nations (25-31).

Elsewhere, salvation itself is linked to the faithfulness of the wise: 'By steadfast love and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the Lord one turns away from evil' (Prov 16:6; cf. Is 52:13). In this Jesus was not only 'something greater than Solomon' (Mt 12:42, para.) in the extent of his wisdom but the very manifestation of God's wisdom. As Paul proclaims, 'Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God' (1 Cor 1:30; cf. 28; Jn 1:1-5f.; Col 2:3). By acting wisely Jesus confronts and confounds the conniving powers of evil and undoes their arrogance and rebellion.

Although the term 'redeemer' is hardly thought of in connection with its original OT clan function of *go'el*, the kinsman redeemer, that is exactly what it means. The *go'el* epitomized heroic

30 See Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*.

familial duty and sacrificial hospitality in the Israelite socio-economy, stepping in, often at risk to his own well-being, to rescue distressed family members from debt and slavery. 'Redemption' is primarily an economic metaphor and the 'redeemer' is often portrayed as liberating the debtors, slaves and captives of sin requiring a ransom for their release (eg. 1 Cor 6:20; 1 Pet 1:18-19; 1 Tim 2:6; Tit 2:14).

Once again, Jesus perfectly embodied the ideal Israelite. The psalmist humbly acknowledged that 'Truly no man can ransom another or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, that he should live on forever and never see the pit' (Ps 49:7-8). Therefore, he trusted that '…God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me' (15). Jesus not only paid the ransom for indebted and enslaved sinners; he did so by becoming the ransom *himself* (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45; 1 Tim 2:6).

As Janzen summarizes,

> Obedience to God's word and suffering on account of the inevitable opposition to it became central to this prophetic paradigm. It became foundational for the suffering yet vindicated Servant Jesus Christ and the suffering yet redeemed servant community founded by him. Though Jesus Christ also embraced paradigmatically the offices of king, priest, and sage, these were qualitatively transformed by the attributes of the suffering and redeemed servant. He was the lowly king; the self-sacrificing priest; the bringer of wisdom not of this world. Above all, he was the Son of God, as Israel had been God's son. In that role he was the embodiment of Israel. …[T]hese components of the paradigm of Jesus Christ were not abruptly innovative, but deeply rooted in the Old Testament's paradigmatic pattern…'

Therefore, when Jesus and his apostolic witnesses needed to expound the fullness of his saving work on the cross in specific contexts of proclamation, worship and teaching they did so by drawing on these very categories of loving king and obedient subject. Images of victory, judgement, liberation, rule and reward proceed from the royal paradigm. The law-suit idiom of justification and the familial image of reconciliation are recognizably prophetic concerns. Purification, sanctification, expiation and propitiation are priestly functions. Making the foolish wise and bringing the immature to maturity are sapiential goals. Redemption, release, restoration, hospitality, adoption and inheritance are facilitated by the kinsman-redeemer.

Therefore, the variety of salvation images freely employed by Jesus and NT writers makes sense within the two broad categories of perfect king and perfect citizen, both of which Christ fulfilled uniquely, supremely and with finality.

2. The Kingdom and Atonement Theories

Michael McNichols makes a very pertinent observation about the current debate on the atonement when he states that

> …the atonement is best viewed through the lens of the kingdom of God rather than through any one theological theory. In the atonement—the full expanse of Jesus'

life, death, and post-resurrection existence— the kingdom is launched into human history, the people of God are reborn and redefined, and the mission of God is made evident to the world. Viewing the atonement within the context of the kingdom of God expands the understanding of salvation to include the destiny of individuals without ignoring the biblical narrative's inclusion of the whole of creation in God's eschatological intentions.[31]

While usefully highlighting vital theological truths about the cross, atonement theories cannot offer a comprehensive historical-theological account of Christ's death. Even the ablest defenders of the centrality of penal substitution humbly concede that other images of the atonement are necessary to make up the fuller picture of what Christ accomplished.[32] The development of atonement theories within historical theology has been a more complex process than has sometimes been portrayed. They neither fall into neat chronological epochs, nor can they be uniformly attributed to particular cultural incubations.

While cultural factors were more influential in the origin of some theories such as Anselm's satisfaction theory, notions of penal substitution appear across the span of church history.[33] The metaphorical nature of atonement language is essential for theological construction and yet requires a foundation of historical actuality to reflect upon.[34] Romans 5 illustrates the point excellently. This text is arguably the most paradigmatic delineation of the atonement in the NT (other examples would include Phil 2:5-11; Gal 3:10-14; Col 1:13-23; 2:9-15).

In the first half of the chapter, Paul enumerates the many—present and future—*benefits* of Christ's saving act (Rom 5:1-11): 'justified by faith… peace with God' (1), 'access by faith into this grace in which we stand… [the] hope of the glory of God' (2), '[ability to] rejoice in our sufferings… and hope [that] does not put us to shame…, God's love […] poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us' (3-5), 'justified by his blood…saved […] from the wrath of God' (9), 'reconciled to God… [we shall be] saved by his life' (10), 'now received reconciliation' (11).

The fact that neither Jesus nor Paul nor any other NT writer provides an elaborate delineation of an 'atonement theory' but instead drew on familiar biblical motifs which were readily understood (if not believed) by their Jewish and Gentile contemporaries

31 Michael McNichols, *Atonement as Kingdom Reality* (paper presented to the Society of Vineyard Scholars, October 2010), 12-13. Accessible at <http://www.academia.edu/470976/Atonement_as_Kingdom_Reality>.

32 See Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Nottingham: IVP/Wheaton, IL: Crossways, 2007), 210.

33 Jeffery, et al., *Pierced*, 161-204.

34 See Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 1988), esp. 64, 88; and Henri Blocher's defence of metaphors in understanding the atonement in 'Biblical Metaphors and the Doctrine of the Atonement', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47:4 (Dec 2004), 629-45.

indicates that the presentation of the atonement in the NT as a whole corresponded plausibly with the narrative, ethical and institutional framework of the OT. If later interpreters unfamiliar with that thought-world would see instead clues suggestive of transactional mechanisms that were plausible to their own socio-intellectual milieu, they would be missing the atonement's richer theological context.

'Justified by faith' and 'saved from the wrath of God' would naturally resonate with minds shaped by Roman and Teutonic legal concepts. 'Hope of the glory of God' could likewise be comprehended as deification to intellects attuned to Greek mysticism. 'Peace with God' and 'reconciliation' would similarly resonate with feudal notions of fealty and the restoration of honour. The point, of course, is to keep going back to the whole story of God's mission in the Bible.

Notice that Paul does not simply leave us with a multiplicity of images. He goes beyond the metaphors to locate the atoning act itself. This act embodies, and is therefore expressible by, the range of atonement images employed. Paul identifies the crux of the atonement in the second part of the chapter, revealing the *basis* of the salvation blessings he has just described.[35]

He does this by contrasting Adam's act of sin and incurred death with Christ's reversal of that penalty by his act of salvation (Rom 5:12-21): Adam's act is described as 'one man's trespass' while Christ's is 'the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ' (15). Whereas 'the judgement following [Adam's] one trespass brought condemnation,…the free gift following many trespasses brought justification' (16). Because of Adam's trespass 'death reigned' but 'the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life' through Christ (17; also 21). What constituted this 'free gift by the grace of one man' is then very clearly described:

> Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men,
> so *one act of righteousness* leads to justification and life for all men.
> For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners,
> so by the *one man's obedience* the many will be made righteous (18-19).

Irenaeus' idea of 'recapitulation' (based on Rom 5:12-21)[36] did not go far enough to understand that Christ's redeeming obedience not only undid Adam's sin to bring humankind out of Satan's power, but that Christ's obedience re-established God's acknowledged rule over creation which Adam was excluded from because of his act of betrayal.[37] Paul's plain prose identifies the veritable 'baseline' of the atonement from the angle of Christ's humanity: Christ's righteousness which consisted in his obedience reversed the effect of Adam's disobedience which

35 Douglas J. Moo, *NICNT Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 317.

36 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.18.7; 3.21.9-10; 3.22.3; 5.21.1.

37 Irenaeus believed that the kingdom of God would be inaugurated only at the second coming of Christ. See Denis Minns OP, *Irenaeus: An Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 140-148.

was his trespass, thereby enabling condemned sinners to become righteous and live. The one act of atonement is the wellspring of a multiplicity of metaphorical images.

Therefore, a kingdom perspective of the atonement can account for the diversity of the Bible's salvation images. It spares us the Procrustean alternative of privileging one atonement theory over others, while constituting a common point of reference by which all the kaleidoscopic images are held together.

Finally, a kingdom perspective of the atonement fulfils two criteria that a successful atonement theory ought to do. First, it explains how the cross *simultaneously* addresses all the constituents of the atonement: a justly angered yet loving God, a sinful and lost humanity, a creation subjected to futility, and an incorrigibly evil adversary.

Second, it is both objective and subjective. In Christ's kingdom-inauguration, we not only receive atonement by Christ's kingly love and citizenly obedience which, *objectively*, wins God's approval. We are also taught, *subjectively* (by the transformation of the whole orientation of our lives) how to live lives of serving love and filial obedience worthy of the kingdom. For we are not invited merely to be citizens of Christ's kingdom, but to be co-heirs and co-regents with him. We receive that reward only by persevering through the same trials and seizing the same opportunities of service that he demonstrated.

3. The Kingdom and the Gospel

The proposed kingdom perspective of the cross resolves the needless tension between the so-called 'salvation gospel' and 'kingdom gospel', because it establishes the inauguration of the kingdom as the necessary precondition for salvation of individuals and nations. This is the significance of references to the 'now' (in distinction to references to 'the past') in the earliest apostolic preaching, that God has begun to reclaim his world by exalting Jesus as Lord through the victory of his life, death and resurrection to save both Jews and Gentiles who repent and submit to his rule from judgement (Acts 2: 14-40; 3: 17-21; 10:34-43; 17:30-31). It is not merely what he *did* on the cross (inaugurating God's redemptive rule), but what he *became* for us (our exalted Saviour and Lord), as manifested by the resurrection, that makes Jesus the protagonist of God's kingdom.

Don Carson and others have expressed legitimate concern that the definition of the gospel in primarily kingdom terms tends to reduce its message to a nebulous and moralistic 'social gospel' as witnessed in early 20th century liberal Christianity.[38] The reason, however, for that flawed conceptualization of both the gospel and kingdom was precisely the denial that the cross of Christ had actually introduced a new *status quo* that altered the relationship between God and humankind. But an understanding of the kingdom that is ontologically dependent upon the cross of Christ cannot be sundered from the forgiveness and salvation it makes uniquely possible.

The kingdom and cross are inextricably linked. The reign that God begins on the cross of Christ is indeed about

38 Carson, 'What Is the Gospel?—Revisited', 160-161.

the conversion of sin-ridden creatures and the renewing of our evil-riddled creation with judgement and re-creation. We are called to repent because God is already bringing humanity to account for our offensive ways of being, and called to believe because God is introducing a future existence already discernible within our present experience. We are embraced into the convicting and sanctifying communion of the triune God for the very purpose of devoting our energies to his mission in and for creation.

The kingdom perspective of the cross recognizes the critical instrumentality of Jesus' death for the realization of God's redemptive rule. It makes the cross central for the kingdom, and the kingdom central for the cross. By clarifying for us that the basis of salvation is the inauguration of the kingdom, and that the purpose of salvation is the life of the kingdom, we are kept from the heretical tendency of choosing between the 'salvation gospel' and the 'kingdom gospel'.

Furthermore, a kingdom perspective of the atonement brings greater clarity to the interconnection between Jesus' lordship and saviourship. From this perspective we understand better why Jesus prays, '…glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, *since you have given him authority over all flesh* [i.e. lordship]*, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him* [i.e. saviourship]' (Jn 17:1-2). For it is by first establishing the reality of God's redemptive rule that Jesus brings people into it.

The same kingdom authority is the *raison d'être* of the apostles' disciple-making mission: '*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*. Go *therefore* and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you…' (Mt 28:18-20). It is also Paul's all-compassing orientation for Christian ethics: '…So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, *that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living*' (Rom 14:8-9).

A kingdom perspective of the atonement also draws us more naturally to missional discipleship, as it calls us to imitate the sacrificial love and loyal obedience of Christ. As became evident in the so-called 'lordship salvation' debate, for some at least whose Christian initiation was based on a deficient exposition of penal substitution, the realization that discipleship invariably demanded costly obedience apparently came as a subsequent realization.[39]

The point is that Jesus does not simply die on the cross in our place, so that we do not have to die ourselves ('exclusive substitution'); nor even that in his death we have already died ('inclusive substitution'); but, more accurately, that Christ calls us to die on the cross with him, daily (Lk 9:23). The NT resounds with the conviction that by the atonement Christ's disciples do not by any means escape the cross, but rather, are inexorably crucified to it (Mt 10:38; 16:24-26; Mk 8:34-35; Lk 9:23; 14:25-33; Jn 12:24; Rom 6:1-7, 11, 14; 7:4-6; 8:12-13; 12:1-2; 2 Cor 5:15, 17; Eph 4:22-25; Gal 2:19-20; 5:24; 6:14; Col 2:12-20; 3:1, 3-7; 2 Tim

39 See Michael S. Horton (ed.), *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation* (Wipf & Stock, 2009).

2:11; Tit 2:11; 1 Pet 2:24; Rev 2:10b; 26-28, etc.).

Must the gospel then necessarily be articulated in explicitly 'kingdom' language? Yes and no. No, because we understand from the NT itself that there is flexibility here. While the Synoptics speak of experiencing atonement as 'entering' (eg. Jn 3:5), 'seeing' (3:3), 'inheriting' (Mt 25:34), and 'receiving' (Mk 10:15) God's kingdom, John mostly prefers the corresponding expressions of 'life', 'eternal life', 'in God', 'in truth', and so on.

Paul's use of 'in Christ', 'in the Lord' or 'in the Spirit' also communicates a comparable sense. However, the underlying basis of all these expressions is the same: God's new initiative in Christ to include within his transforming sovereignty a creation otherwise lost.[40] As John Stott argued,

> Of course the announcement of God's kingdom was the very heart of the message of Jesus, and to Jewish audiences steeped in the messianic expectation the apostles continued to proclaim it. But already in the New Testament the good news was expressed in other terms. In John's Gospel the emphasis is on eternal life rather than on the kingdom, and to Gentiles Paul preferred to proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior. Yet all these are different ways of saying the same thing. If we are to preach the gospel faithfully, we must declare that through the death and resurrection of Jesus a new era dawned and a new life became possible. But we may speak of this new life in terms of God's kingdom or Christ's lordship or salvation or eternal life or in other ways. It is certainly not essential to refer explicitly to the kingdom; indeed in countries which are not monarchies but republics kingdom language sounds distinctly odd.[41]

Similarly, Lesslie Newbigin made the following observations:

> Jesus proclaimed the reign of God and sent out his disciples to do the same. But that is not all. His mission was not only a matter of words, and neither is ours. If the New Testament spoke only of the proclamation of the kingdom there could be nothing to justify the adjective 'new.' The prophets and John the Baptist also proclaimed the kingdom. What is new is that in Jesus the kingdom is present. That is why the first generation of Christian preachers used a different language from the language of Jesus: he spoke about the kingdom, they spoke about Jesus. They were bound to make this shift of language if they were to be faithful to the facts. It was not only that the phrase 'kingdom of God' in the ears of a pagan Greek would be almost meaningless, having none of the deep reverberations that it evoked for someone nourished on the Old Testament. It was that the kingdom, or kingship, of God was no longer a distant hope or a faceless concept. It had now a name and a face—the name and face of the man from Nazareth. In the New Testament we are dealing not just with the proclamation of the kingdom but also with the presence of the kingdom.[42]

Therefore, although 'kingdom' phraseology is not essential in evangelistic preaching the all-encompassing new reality of God's redemptive rule must necessarily be communicated. The appeal to each individual to repent and believe ('salvation gospel') is the necessary *response* to the reality of God retaking charge of his creation through Christ ('kingdom gospel').

The first apostolic gospel proclamation at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-40) is surely paradigmatic here. First, Peter concluded his message with the resounding declaration: 'Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified' (Acts 2:36). To this, a response was inexorable. 'Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"' (37).

Second, the appropriate response was urged: 'And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself"' (38-39). Interestingly, the earliest evidence of Paul's evangelization attests to the same gospel content. In 1 Thessalonians (written in the early AD 50s), Paul writes, 'For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory' (2:11-12).

The gospel consists of these two inseparable parts: (a) the proclamation that the *kingdom of God* was inaugurated by the *cross of Christ* and, (b) the appeal to repent and align oneself personally and corporately with that new reality.

IV Conclusion

A kingdom perspective of the atonement is able to hold together the many emphases that models of atonement attempt to convey. It shows how the covenantal expectations of the Hebrew Scriptures are fulfilled in Christ, indicating the significance of his life and ministry, as well as his death and resurrection, and links seamlessly the themes of the kingdom of God and the cross. Through it we see how the messages of personal salvation and cosmic renewal cohere. Consequently, a kingdom perspective of the atonement offers fresh insight for our ever-reforming understandings of the gospel, conversion, discipleship, church and mission.

40 G. E. Ladd explored these terms in *A Theology of the New Testament* (rev. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993). For kingdom language in the Synoptics see (54-67); for Johannine expressions (290-305); for characteristically Pauline idioms (521-537). See also Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (eds.), *The Kingdom of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossways, 2012).

41 John R. W. Stott, *Culture and the Bible* (Reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock; originally, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 16. And yet, republics are based on the notion of sovereignty too (that sovereignty rests with the citizens).

42 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapid, MI: Eerdmans, 1978, rev. 1995), 40.