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God's work. Our hands.

## Study guide

# Thy kingdom come

By Robert C. Blezard

Jesus taught and preached on the kingdom of God and heaven more than just about any other topic. The reign of God features prominently in Jesus' parables, in his encounters with others and in his talks. Yet Jesus never called for his followers to focus so much on the reign of God that they become otherworldly—losing sight of our work in this world of loving our neighbors as ourselves and treating others as we would have them treat us. Understanding the reign of God frees us to be good neighbors and good citizens who can help promote security, justice and values in the public and economic sphere.

### Exercise 1: Kingdom, reign, rule, sovereignty

As Kathryn Kleinhans points out in her article, the concept of “kingdom” can be hard to understand for us who live in Western democracies. Moreover, it can be misleading because we think of a kingdom as a place with clear boundaries. Scholars suggest “reign of God,” “rule of God” or “sovereignty of God” would be better translations for the Greek word from which we get “kingdom.” Discuss:

- When Jesus uses the word “kingdom,” what images and definitions come to mind? What is he talking about? Is it a place? If not, what?
- How do you understand the limitations of the word “kingdom” in describing the reality Jesus is referring to in the Gospels?
- What are the distinctions between the words “kingdom,” on the one hand, and “reign,” “rule” or “sovereignty” on the other?
- Find a Scripture passage that you particularly like in which Jesus talks about the kingdom. Read it aloud slowly and repeatedly, first using the word “kingdom,” and then substituting “reign,” “rule” and “sovereignty.” What new ideas and insights did the alternative words for kingdom offer you?

### Exercise 2: The kingdom is among you

Discuss, first, what you think about sovereignty/rule/kingdom/reign of God? What is it? Where is it? How do you know? In what time frame does it exist? What is it like? How do you get there?

Now read Jesus' intriguing insight in Luke 17:20-21: “Once Jesus was asked



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by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.'

- What is your reaction to this teaching? How does this teaching upend all your ideas about what the sovereignty of God might be?
- Based on Jesus' description, where does the reign of God exist? When does it exist? How do you know?
- In what ways is the kingdom of God "within you"?

### Exercise 3: Dual "citizenship"

In praying to God in John 17:14, Jesus described his followers as not belonging "to the world," yet he doesn't ask God to take us out of the world. Read the full passage. In what ways does this describe the tension we all face as people of faith—we live in the world, but aren't of the world?

- Do you agree that to be a Christian means that our primary identity is formed by our baptism as children of God and citizens of the reign of God? Why or why not?
- Do you agree that we are also secondarily citizens of the world? Why or why not?
- How does this "dual citizenship" sometimes cause trouble in our lives? What kind of difficulty does it cause when we mistakenly make our worldly citizenship more important than—or even just as important as—our spiritual citizenship? Why is it a mistake? Have you seen it?
- Does being a citizen of the reign of God mean that we should disengage from our worldly citizenship and become unconcerned with how our secular government runs? Why or why not?
- What is a responsible balance between being primarily a citizen of the reign of God and secondarily a citizen of our nation?
- Jesus says we are to be the light of the world and salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13-16). What does this mean? In what ways does this empower us to be engaged in civic and governmental affairs? As Christians, how must we be salt and light to our communities and governments?

### Exercise 4: "Two kingdoms"

- Martin Luther taught that God worked through two realms that exist side-by-side and interrelate: The church and civic (worldly) governments. How do you understand this concept? Is it true? How do you see it working in your community? State? Our country?
- How does Luther's idea of the two ways that God works in the world



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integrate well with the previous exercise's exploration of our dual citizenship?

### Exercise 5: Governments serve God

In Romans 13:1-7, Paul describes a relationship between God and worldly rulers. Since God is the ultimate authority, worldly leaders serve God's purposes. Because of this, Paul argues, Christians should pay taxes, obey laws and respect authority.

- Do you agree with Paul's analysis? Why or why not? What would you change? How far would you take his argument?
- Do you believe God appoints evil rulers who abuse their power and treat their people badly? Why or why not?
- In saying that we should be obedient to rulers, does that necessitate blind obedience? Why or why not? In what ways could one be obedient to unfair or bad laws, yet work for changes that would make them more just?
- Referring to civic leaders, Paul says we should pay "respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." Why are some leaders due more honor and respect than others? Can you think of examples?

### Exercise 6: Church and politics

The U.S. Constitution prohibits the government from establishing or promoting one religion over another. This has in recent times come to be understood as "separation of church and state." And yet the Pledge of Allegiance declares us "one nation, under God," and each piece of our currency declares "In God we trust."

- Does the Constitution forbid Christians from being involved in politics? Does our faith forbid us from being involved in politics? Should Christians hold elected office?
- In what ways could you make the argument that Christians have an obligation to become involved in civil government? What Christian values—not doctrines or beliefs, but values—could enrich our country and help promote good government, fair government and sound policies that promote the public good?
- Following the tenets of our faith and the law of the land, if Christians are elected to public office or advocate for policies, how could they balance their personal beliefs with the needs and urgencies of political life? When would personal faith and values be of assistance in political involvement? When would a Christian "cross the line" and allow personal beliefs to overly influence political life?



### About the study guide author:



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### Exercise 7: Advocacy work

In addition to advocacy work done by individuals and congregations, our denomination is formally involved with shaping public policy on the federal level through the ELCA Advocacy office in Washington, D.C., as well as on the state level through offices in several states. Its mission: "As members of the ELCA, we believe that we are freed in Christ to serve and love our neighbor. God uses our hands, through our direct service work, and our voices, through our advocacy efforts, to restore and reconcile our world. Through faithful advocacy, the ELCA lives out our Lutheran belief that governments can help advance the common good" ([elca.org/advocacy](http://elca.org/advocacy)).

- Sometimes people confuse *lobbying* (influencing public policy to directly benefit oneself or a client) with *advocacy* (influencing public policy not to benefit oneself but everybody, or the public good). How would you describe the difference between lobbying and advocacy to someone who didn't understand it?
- Why would lobbying be inappropriate for a church organization? Why is advocacy appropriate? In what ways is advocacy for the poor, the naked, the homeless, the hungry and the common good in keeping with the mission of the Christian church?
- Are you or your congregation involved in advocacy work? Why or why not? How could you better raise your Christian voices in order to help?

### Discussion questions

- "God's work. Our hands." What does this ELCA slogan mean to you? Describe the ways in which it expresses concisely how our church understands the connection between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world. What are you doing, and what does your congregation do, for "God's work. Our hands." Sunday? Do you join in?
- Our baptismal certificate proves that we are citizens of the reign of God. Our birth certificates or naturalization papers declare us citizens of our country. Which one comes first, and why? Should we ever put our national citizenship above our citizenship under the sovereignty of God? Why or why not? How do you draw that balance?
- In what ways does Jesus' command to love our neighbor empower us to care deeply about what happens in our government and be concerned about policies that affect others?
- Christians proudly serve in their government as employees, as elected or appointed officials, and as concerned citizens. To what degree should their faith direct their actions? What would be "too little" influence by their faith in their conduct? What would be "too much" influence?

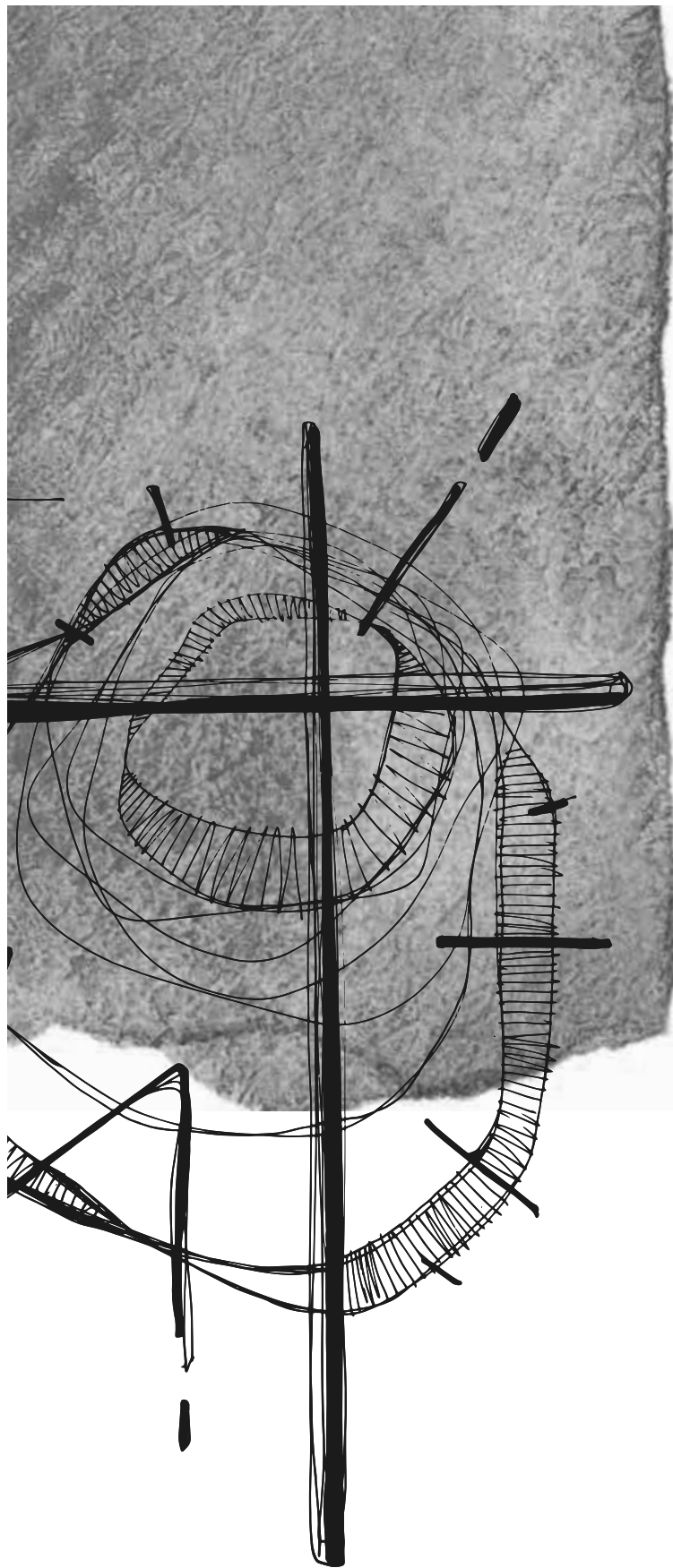


# Thy kingdom come

By Kathryn A. Kleinhans



God continues to be active in the world as its creator and sustainer, even while God in Christ is also active as the world's redeemer.



What do you expect as you pray the words “your kingdom come” from the Lord’s Prayer? You might be thinking about a blessed promised future in heaven. You might be thinking ahead to the very next line of the Lord’s Prayer, considering God’s “kingdom” as whenever and wherever God’s will is being done. You might even stop to consider how odd the word “kingdom” is for us who live in 21st-century democracies.

One challenge the word poses is that we tend to associate “kingdom” with a place, specifically a place ruled by a king. Biblical scholars suggest that “reign” or “rule” may be a better translation of the Greek word as the primary emphasis is on God’s activity, rather than on the place where it happens.

What activity are we talking about? Martin Luther believed that God is at work in the world in two different ways: in and through the created world for the welfare of all, and through the gospel to bring people to saving faith in Jesus Christ. In the past, theologians often called this Luther’s “two kingdoms” doctrine, but that language can be misleading because it sounds like he is talking about two different places. But Luther meant something very different.

In the United States, we often talk about the separation of church and state. This is a relatively modern idea that tends to compartmentalize God and faith within the church. It assumes that God is part of our private lives but has little or no place in public life. “Church” is about what happens on Sunday (and perhaps Wednesday night), while “state” gets the rest of the week.

Luther refused to compartmentalize God by limiting God’s activity only to the church. God is creator as well as redeemer, so God is God of the whole world. God continues to be active in the world as its creator and sustainer, even while God in Christ is also active as the world’s redeemer.

Imagine God as the conductor of a choir or orchestra. When you watch closely, you see that a conductor’s hands each move differently. Typically, one hand indicates the beat, while the other may cue a specific instrument or voice, or raise or lower the volume. A good conductor has to be ambidextrous, using both hands simultaneously.

God also does two different things at the same time. Luther distinguishes between what he calls the spiritual authority of the gospel, described as “the right hand of God,” and earthly or political authority, described as “the left hand of God.” While these two kinds of authority have different functions, Luther insists that they both come from God.

Today, Lutheran theologians often talk about God’s *two kinds of authority* or *two modes of governing* rather than using the misleading “two kingdoms” language.

#### **Government as God’s good gift**

Luther lived in a very different context from ours. Church and state were rivals for power, and leaders typically dipped their hands into both spheres of influence. During his time, bishops exercised political authority over the areas that were under their spiritual care, and political authorities enforced laws against heresy.

Leaders assumed that religious conformity was a necessary part of a well-ordered society, and they insisted on it. Luther was concerned about these boundary violations. Legal or political authority, he insisted, pertained only to matters of body and property. It wasn’t acceptable for political leaders to attempt to regulate the faith of their subjects.

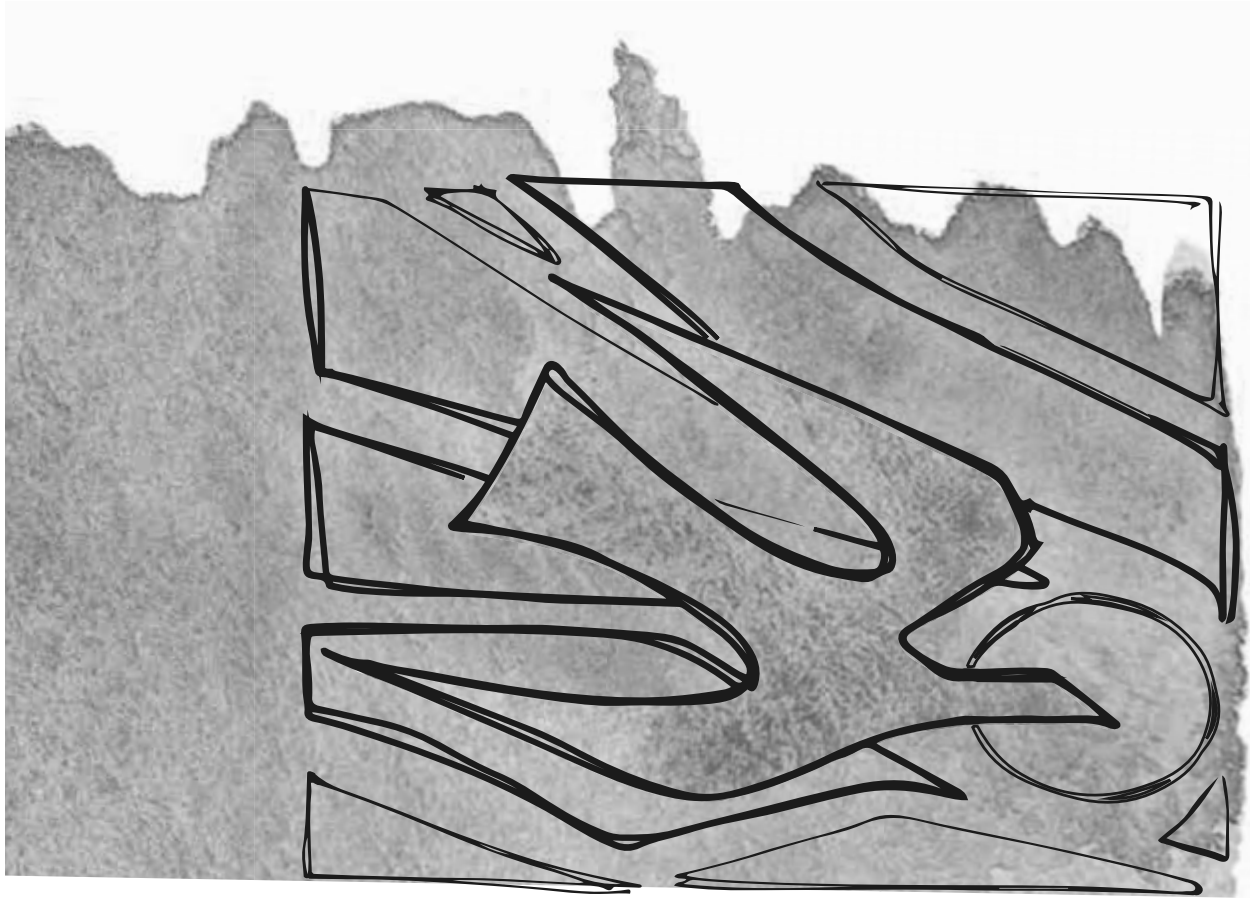
Luther didn’t want church leaders in charge of politics any more than he wanted political leaders running the church. Nonetheless, he brought faith to bear on social and political matters. He wrote about the responsibilities of civic leadership. He dedicated some of his writings to individual politicians. Perhaps most surprising is what he wrote about government itself.

In the Large Catechism, Luther lifted up government as one of God’s good gifts. He included it in his explanation of the first article of the Apostles’ Creed, which confesses God as creator. For Luther, confessing God as creator is not only about what happened when the world began. His emphasis is on how “God has given ... and still preserves” everything that exists.

“Although we have  
received from God all  
good things in abundance,  
we cannot retain any of  
them or enjoy them in  
security and happiness  
were God not to give  
us a stable, peaceful  
government. For where  
dissension, strife, and  
war prevail, there daily  
bread is already taken  
away or at least reduced.”







Civic leaders are stewards to whom God has entrusted the responsibility of establishing and maintaining good order in the world.

### Not a blank check

Of course, this doesn't mean that government can't be questioned. The belief that political authority is a good gift of God doesn't justify all forms of government and all laws. Rather, it provides a perspective from which to hold government accountable. Civic leaders are stewards to whom God has entrusted the responsibility of establishing and maintaining good order in the world. When they fail to do so, they are rightly criticized.

This understanding of government as one of the means through which God provides for God's people and for creation is an important contribution in our time too. Often our conversation in the U.S. focuses on the size of government. Our political parties use the polarizing rhetoric of "big government" or "small government." Luther recognized that both extremes are problematic.

Difficulties occur, Luther wrote, when government reaches too far but also when it's restricted too much. What Lutherans can contribute to the conversation is what we might think of as a "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" perspective. How do we shape a government that is neither "too big" nor "too small" but "just right" to fulfill its God-given functions in this place and time?

### This isn't an easy task

"We disagree profoundly about matters such as what constitutes a well-lived human life, what is in the public interest, what is the role of the government in society, and what rights and duties we ought to have with respect to each other," said Brad Wendel, professor of law at Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., and co-chair of the ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice: One in Christ.

For him, it's essential that we treat each other with respect, recognizing that those with whom we disagree are also operating in good faith.

"To me, one of the most important Lutheran insights is that we're simultaneously saints and sinners," Wendel said. "Even as we're working in the world as part of the left hand of God, we're sometimes unable to see clearly what we ought to do, or to act in the way we're supposed to, because of our sinfulness. From that follows what I think is one of the most important and underappreciated Lutheran virtues, which is humility."

Wendel cautions that there isn't a direct, straightforward relationship between God's design for the world and how any one of our civic institutions should be set up and regulated. Living out our faith in the public sphere will never be as simple as a "What Would Jesus Do?" bumper sticker.

"Nevertheless," he said, "I take heart in the gospel and believe that God is at work in the world through civic institutions like legislatures, courts, businesses, private charities and foundations, unions, advocacy organizations and so on."

### What does this mean for us today?


It's easy to be cynical about politics. In the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*, a member of the Russian Jewish community asks the rabbi, "Is there a proper blessing for the czar?" The rabbi responds, "May God bless and keep the czar ... far away from us." It's a good laugh line, but it's a sad commentary on popular attitudes toward political leaders.

Nathan Piphon, a pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Worcester, Mass., has had a lifelong interest in politics. He returned to school in 2015 to study the intersections of faith and politics at Harvard Kennedy School of Government. As a member of the school's mid-career group, he had classmates from more than 70 countries, with government, nonprofit, private sector and military backgrounds.

"Across the political spectrum, my classmates had a heart for public service and for making the world a better place," Piphon said. "In the diversity of their vocations, and in their shared desire to work for the common good, I saw God at work bringing order and stability to the world and meeting the needs of humanity."

With this, Piphon offers advice for Christians: "First, live out Luther's explanation of the Eighth Commandment: 'To come to the defense of our elected officials, speak well of them, and to interpret their actions in the best possible light.' Second, find ways to help our elected officials succeed in their vocations as public servants."

"In my experience of city, state and federal government, there are lots of officeholders in both major political parties trying to make a positive difference. Finding ways to help dedicated public servants succeed in their vocations is not about advancing a narrow partisan agenda, but about establishing responsive local, state and federal governments that effectively address the real needs and issues of the communities they serve."

Luther would agree. 

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