

What is the Kingdom of God Like?

Reflections on the Church and State

¹⁸ He said therefore, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it?

¹⁹ It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.”

²⁰ And again he said, “To what shall I compare the kingdom of God?

²¹ It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.”

⁷ Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them,

⁸ “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him,

⁹ and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place.

¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you.

¹¹ For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

¹² He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid.

¹³ But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,

¹⁴ and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

¹⁵ When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!”

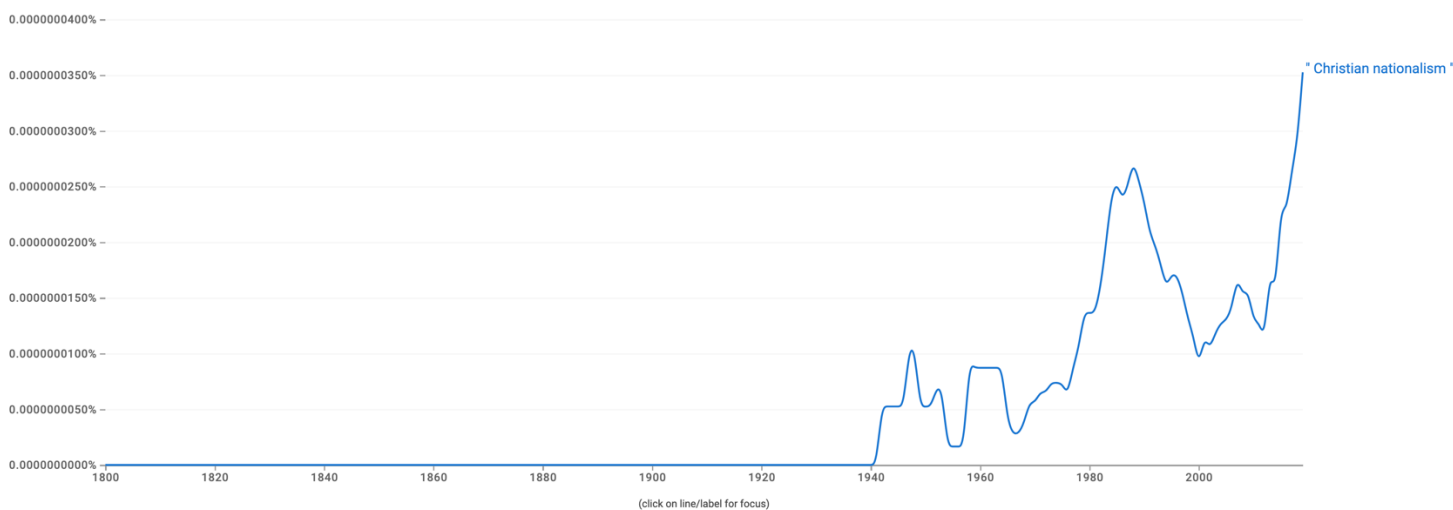
¹⁶ But he said to him, “A man once gave a great banquet and invited many.

¹⁷ And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'
¹⁸ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.'
¹⁹ And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.'
²⁰ And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.'
²¹ So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.'
²² And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.'
²³ And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled.'
²⁴ For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.' ”
(Luke 13:18-21; 14:7-24)

Christian Nationalism

Whatever you think about [the events that unfolded on Jan 6, 2021](#) in the nation's capital, a couple of things are certain. [First](#), over 1,000 people were arrested for various forms of rioting and assault, and many of those people still rot in substandard miniscule jail cells without having had a quick and speedy trial two-and-a-half years later. [Second](#), from almost the hour after it happened, a phrase began multiplying through various Christian and non-Christian sub-cultures called "[Christian nationalism](#)," which is now inextricably linked to Jan 6.

I had never even heard of the term until a couple of years ago. There is a reason for this. Mark David Hall, political science professor at George Fox University looked at 332 law review articles that included the phrase ‘Christian nationalism’ between 1994-2021 and discovered that 90% of them were published *after* January 1, 2006.¹ In fact, you can go to *Google Books Ngram Viewer*, type in “Christian nationalism” and discover that the term basically began near the beginning of WWII. It saw a sharp increase in usage between 1980-88 (where it peaked), declined, and then saw an even greater and faster rise beginning in 2015-16 and it has not yet begun to level.²



¹ Mark David Hall, “[Tilting at Windmills: The ‘Threat’ of Christian Nationalism](#),” *Standing for Freedom* (Feb 8, 2022), n. 9.

² The chart is from *Google Books Ngram Viewer*, “Christian nationalism,” (Aug 14, 2023).

This chart is very informative for one reason. It demonstrates what most scholars admit—that [the term is not used by those who are claimed to be Christian nationalists](#).³ If that's true, and you think about [who was president](#) between 1980-88 and again beginning in 2016 and is omnipresent still in the news today, then you can easily see who is using the term and to what end. It is being used [by those who disagree](#) with whatever it is they say these people supposedly believe. To put it another way, it is being used as a term of derision rather than of endearment, to demonize and obscure rather than inform and generate healthy public discourse.

So [what is a Christian nationalist?](#) Of course, the problem is that if no one self-identifies with that label, it is those who disagree with it who usually get to create the definition. So you get things like this. On the [more mild](#) side it is, [“The belief that the American nation is defined by Christianity, and that the government should take active steps to keep it](#)

³ *“Its advocates generally do not use it of themselves.”* [Paul D. Miller](#), [“What is Christian Nationalism: An Explainer on How the Belief Differs from Other Forms of Nationalism, Patriotism, and Christianity,”](#) *Christianity Today* (Feb 2, 2021). [Most of the literature on Christian nationalism is written by activists and journalists who clearly have axes to grind.”](#) [Mark David Hall](#), [“Christian Nationalism: An Existential Threat?”](#) *Law & Liberty* (Sept 8, 2022). “I do not know anyone who self-identifies as a Christian nationalist.” [Colin Hansen](#), [“Christian Nationalism: Heresy of Hype?”](#) *TGC* (May 11, 2021).

that way.”⁴ That’s pretty vague actually and not very helpful. Increasingly pointed and radical ways of putting it are, “America is special to God ... part of his outworking of redemptive history,”⁵ or “America is the last hope of Christianity,”⁶ or “America [by which is meant English speaking, white, Evangelical, Republican] is the point of the Gospels.”⁷

Now compare this with one of the few sources I could find from someone actually claiming to be a Christian nationalist which defined it as, “A set of governing principles rooted in Scripture’s teaching that Christ rules as supreme Lord and King of all creation, who has ordained civil magistrates with delegated authority to be under Him, over the people, to order their ordained jurisdiction by punishing evil and promoting good for His own glory and the common good of the nation (Isaiah 9:6-7; John 1:1-3; 3:35; 17:2; Ephesians 1:20-21; Philippians 2:9-11; Colossians 1:15-18; Romans 13:1-4; 1 Peter 2:14; Deuteronomy 6:5, Matthew 22:37-39).”⁸

⁴ Miller, *ibid.* In another place he defines it as “Something identifiable as an American ‘nation,’ distinct from other nations; that American nationhood is and should remain defined by Christianity or Christian cultural norms, and that the American people and their government should actively work to defend, sustain, and cultivate America’s Christian culture, heritage, and values.” Miller, *the Religion of American Greatness*, cited in Hall, “Existential Threat?”

⁵ Michael Horton, “Christian Nationalism: Heresy of Hype?” *TGC* (May 11, 2021).

⁶ An unnamed “biggest” of Trump’s supporters, as related by Hansen, *ibid.*

⁷ John Pavlovitz, “The Heresy of Christian Nationalism,” *John Pavlovitz* (Feb 13, 2018).

⁸ James Silberman and Dusty Deever, “The Statement on Christian Nationalism & the Gospel,” (May 23, 2023). Clark observes, “There is no actual definition of Christian Nationalism

Or how about the earliest resource I could find,

Patriotism is a love of one's country ... cherished in humility, not in pride ... a prime expression of that sense of loyalty which holds men together in groups and without which men could not be the gregarious creatures that by nature they are ... Nationalism, in its historic and simplest sense, is *patriotism applied to one's nationality*. As such it is a common cultural phenomenon, and one compatible with Christianity ... Christian nationalism ... must conform, like any patriotism, to the law of Christ. It must not be an end in itself, but a means to an end—the brotherhood of men and of nations under the Fatherhood of God. It must not make the national state the supreme and exclusive object of man's loyalty. It must not adopt a contemptuous and vainglorious attitude toward foreign nations. Above all, it must not itself become a religion. Rather, it must infuse and purify the love of the natural with love of the supernatural, the love of one's own nation with respect for other nations. It must be guided, both internally and externally, by the supreme Christian principles of justice and charity.⁹

here. There is no definition of nationalism, and no account, so far, of how the adjective Christian modifies nationalism.” R. Scott Clark, “[Sub-Christian Nationalism? \(Part 4\)](#),” *Heidelblog* (June 21, 2023). I disagree and would say, rather, he wants something more specific, which he gets and then blasts holes in throughout the piece. From the R2K perspective, Clark has a lot dedicated to this subject in recent months that can be found in this list [here](#).

⁹ Carlton J. H. Hayes (Chairman), *Patriotism, Nationalism and the Brotherhood of Man: A Report of the Committee on National Attitudes, Pamphlet No. 25* (Washington, D., C., The Catholic Association for International Peace, 1937), 6, 7, 35-36.

These last two are *radically* different definitions which show just how polemical and divisive this subject has become. The latter define it as it should be; the former in its most perverted form.

What's going on here? I believe we are seeing in these different definitions a reflection of **prior assumptions** about how Christians are to view the relationship between Christ and culture, church and state, the present age and the age to come, God's dealing with the world up to and into the millennium, and so on. To the former, any kind of Christian nationalism is at best highly suspicious, and at worst, a deep sin of idolatry (unless, of course, it's woke). To the latter, it is the national outcome of living in God's world and having regard for your fellow man. The two show opposite ideas of something deeply related to our passage today where we are asking, **what is the kingdom of God like?**

What is the Kingdom Like?

Last time, as we went through the central section of Luke's journey narrative to Jerusalem, we spent a little time on the parables of the kingdom. There were **four of them**, put into two pairs. The **first pair compared** the kingdom to

two things. The **second pair** dealt with **who** is welcomed into the kingdom. So “what” and “who.”

The first deal with **the “what” question**. Here they are as Luke has them, “[Jesus] said therefore, ‘What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.’” And again he said, “To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened” (**Luke 13:18-21**).

Common Interpretations of the Mustard and Leaven

As we looked at the first two, I suggested an interpretation of them that is not often considered. Let’s first think about **how the parables are usually considered**. Phil Ryken summarizes three ideas well, asking,

What do these parables mean? There is a danger here of overinterpretation. Some scholars have used these parables to defend *the postmillennial position that Christianity will triumph in the world before the second coming of Jesus Christ*. Others have used them to defend the nearly *opposite view that the*

church will become completely corrupt before Jesus establishes his millennial kingdom (a view based largely on taking leaven as an entirely negative image).

Rather than making these two parables carry more weight than they can bear, it seems wiser and safer to see what general principles they teach about *the progress of God's kingdom work*. What they teach may be summarized as follows: *From a small and seemingly insignificant beginning, the kingdom of God grows—at times invisibly and almost imperceptibly—until it reaches all nations with its transforming power* [emphasis added].¹⁰

A word about each is in order. *Postmillennialism* is a view of eschatology that believes **Jesus will return after the millennium** rather than before it (i.e. Premillennialism). The way it conceives of the coming millennium is via the Great Commission, that the nations are going to overwhelmingly turn to Jesus before he returns. In other words, the vast majority of people on earth will become Christians.¹¹ A Postmillennialist thus reads these parables as teaching something like, *“The mustard seed becomes the largest plant in the garden. Thus ... the gradual extension of the kingdom in the world ... A minuscule seed gives rise to a tree in which birds may*

¹⁰ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 30.

¹¹ This is a simple way that was put by Barry Cooper, “[Postmillennialism](#),” *Ligonier* (Nov 23, 2021).

nest their young. Birds singing among the branches symbolize peaceful serenity ... [while the largeness is] the kingdom's greatness [as compared to other great 'tree' [kingdoms of the OT era such as Babylon and Assyria]].”¹² Thus, “The Church will have a growing influence over the entire world and eventually become the dominant institution.”¹³

On the other hand, those who see the church as becoming “completely corrupt before Jesus establishes his millennial kingdom,” that is, Premillennialists, do so thinking about the agent of leaven as a negative thing, such as when Paul says to the Corinthian church that their sin is “A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (1Cor 5:6). They then point out that these parables do not say when or how the greatness of the kingdom will come, only that it will, and that to presuppose that it comes through human agency and the proclamation of the Gospel over time is not actually in the passage, which is probably true.¹⁴ Instead, they see Jesus' Second Coming as the event that brings us into the millennium,

¹² Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., “Postmillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Stan N. Gundry and Darrell L. Block, Zondervan Counterpoints Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 40, 39.

¹³ Abner Chou, “Millennialism,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

¹⁴ This latter point is found in Ervin Budiselić (who cites Ladd), “[Critical Reflection on the Parables of the Leaven and the Mustard Seed as Foundational for Postmillennialist Eschatology](#),” *KAIROS Evangelical Journal of Theology* 4.1 (2010): 51-62.

causes all people to bow their knee in faith, and thus makes the Mustard the largest of all.

Ryken's view seems to be the **Amillennial** view that the kingdom of God grows, often imperceptibly, until it *reaches all nations* with its transforming power. This means not that the kingdom eventually converts most people to Christ (though, theoretically, it could) or gradually brings about utopia on earth through Christianity, but simply that, “**The kingdom of God will be a tree for the refuge of all nations. It will be ‘a vast movement in which members of various nations will find protection and rest (as the birds of heaven build their nests in the mustard tree).**”¹⁵

The Parable of the Mustard “Tree”

Having looked at the three main interpretations, it is vital to notice what they all have in common. This pertains to the first parable: all three of these views draw upon the comparison between small and large, making this the main point. This is very important to understand, because **Luke does something** here, that if this is really the point, he most certainly should not have done. **He deliberately takes out** [or the

¹⁵ Ryken, 34 citing **Norval Geldenhuys**, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 378.

others add in] the comparison language found in both Matthew and Mark.

Matthew says it is like “a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed ... it is the *smallest* of all seeds, but when it has grown it is *larger*...” (Matt 13:32). Likewise, Mark says, “... a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the *smallest* of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes *larger*...” (Mark 4:31-32). But Luke simply says, “... a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree ...” (Luke 13:19-20). “Smaller” and “larger” just isn’t there.

Why? It stands to reason that if it isn’t here, then *it can’t be the main focus* of the parable. It’s meaning must be found elsewhere. It is into this that understanding that I gave a very different interpretation, one that is rooted in thinking about what is actually present here in Luke.

The first thing to say is that Luke sees this as clearly *related to what came before it*, for Luke says, “*He said therefore...*” (Luke 13:18). What came before is *related in two ways*. The *first* is that there was a mighty *healing* miracle of a woman who had been disabled by a spirit, contorting and distorting her body for 18 years. The *second* is that the *ruler* of the synagogue in which this happened was indignant that

Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, and this fits into the larger context of his refusal to repent of his sins, but rather aligning himself with the **kingdoms of men** that were personified by Pilate (**13:1ff.**) and Herod (**31ff.**).

Second, it is important to **correctly identify the seed** Jesus has in mind. There are two basic options. There is the seed of something called the **Mustard Tree** (*salvadora persica*), also called the Toothbrush Tree because it yields sticks that have been used for centuries as toothbrushes. This tree can grow up to 30 feet and is in fact a real tree that must be planted individually, seed by seed, in order to grow a new one. But its seed can hardly be said to be “the smallest of all seeds,” as Matthew and Mark have it, and clearly, Luke has the same mustard in mind.

Then there is **the mustard plant** (*sinapis alba*), an edible and tasty plant with many medicinal uses, including helping pain in the body and dropsy,¹⁶ both of which are related to

¹⁶ The mustard herb, when pounded with vinegar, can be used a **liniment for the stings** of serpents and scorpions, and it effectually **neutralizes the poisonous** properties of fungi. It can be used to **cure an immoderate secretion of phlegm**, and mixed with hydromel, it can be used as a **gargle**. Mustard can be chewed for **toothache** and is very beneficial for all **maladies of the stomach**. taken with the food, it facilitates **expectoration from the lungs**, and, in combination with cucumber seed, helps for **asthma and epileptic fits**. It has the effect of quickening the senses, effectually clears the head by sneezing, relaxes the stomach, and **promotes menstrual discharge and urinary secretions**. When beaten up with figs and cumin, it is used as an external application for **dropsy**. Mixed with vinegar, mustard resuscitates persons who have swooned in fits of **epilepsy or lethargy**, as well as **females suffering from hysterical suffocations**. It is also a **cure for lethargy**, inveterate **pains of the chest, loins, hips, shoulders**, and, in general, for all deep-seated pains in any part of the body, as well as **blisters and indurations of the skin**. combined with red-

the two miracles that precede Jesus' four parables about the kingdom. This plant can also grow quite large, 10-12 feet, and thus serve as places for nests and perches for birds. It has an incredibly tiny seed, one that fits the description. One may not think this could be what is in mind, because the ESV reads, "tree," not "plant." But the word *dendron* can be translated as shrub or plant or bush or bramble, and I believe should be here.¹⁷



Mustard Tree (*salvadora persica*) with "toothbrush"



Mustard Plant (*sinapis alba*). Bird nest in branches.

Almost all scholars believe that it is the plant and not the tree that is in mind. But if that's true, then we need to think about [the differences between it and the tree](#). The [most important](#) is that the tree, as we have seen, grows up by itself. To get a new one, you must plant another one. The plant,

earth, it helps for alopecia, [itch-scabs](#), [leprosy](#), [phthiriasis](#), [tetanus](#), and [opisthotony](#). (Pliny, *Natural History* 20.87).

¹⁷ [Ernest van Eck](#), "[When Kingdoms are Kingdoms No More: A Social-Scientific Reading of the Mustard Seed \(Lk 13:18-19\)](#)," *Acta Theologica* 33.2 (Dec 2012): 238 n. 29.

on the other hand, is highly invasive. Once present, it spreads like a weed and takes over absolutely everything near it.

Because of this, the **Greeks considered it dangerous and deadly** to a garden (**Pliny**, *Natural History*, 29.54).¹⁸ You can scarcely get rid of it. It consumes all the nutrients and chokes out the other plants. On the other hand, the **Jews considered the plant a mixed kind** and it was thus forbidden as a plant in a Jewish garden (though not a field).¹⁹

Now let's think about this in the larger context, which is almost never done. First, Jesus brought up **Pilate**, the **Gentile ruler** of Judea under Roman Tiberius. In the parallel, Luke has **Herod**, the half-breed ruler of Galilee in mind. This gives us two Gentile or "Greek" rulers that symbolize the view of Jesus' kingdom, if it is being likened to a mustard plant. **Jesus is telling us through the parable that they would view this kingdom** as deadly because of how it invades and chokes out the other plants in the garden. On the other hand, we have the **synagogue ruler, the expert in the law** who is antagonistic about Jesus and has just brought up the law of Moses and the Sabbath. If the kingdom is the mustard

¹⁸ **Van Eck** citing Crossan 1991: 278.

¹⁹ m. Kil 1.5; m. Kil. 3.2; 34. See **B. B. Scott**, *Re-imagine the World: An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2001). 35-46.

plant, then **this man would have viewed the kingdom** as a mixed kind, which is precisely why they were so upset with him for hanging out with tax-collectors and sinners and women and the unclean and violating Jewish tradition of the law while he was at it.

This puts a completely different spin on the parable than we are used to. Rather than the main idea being that the plant goes from the smallest to the largest, culminating in a millennial kingdom (however we get there) with a giant tree, it is the idea that this plant which no one realized was being planted, is now invading the garden. Now, of course Jesus only talks about the **one** plant, but **this invasion is implicit** both in what the mustard plant does and in the birds that come to its branches. As tempting as it is to see in the branches and birds an OT echo of various kingdoms as trees and birds coming to rest peacefully on their branches (**Ps 104:12, 17; Dan 4:12; Ezek 31:3, 5**; etc.), this is not an image of the birds singing happy little songs. For this is not a tree, but a plant, and we are in a garden—and anyone who knows anything about birds in gardens knows that when they come, they have food, not singing on their minds.²⁰ That's why they invented **scarecrows**.

²⁰ “Birds are natural enemies of the sown. A humorous English saying speaks of planting, ‘One [seed] for the rook and one for the crow, two to die and one to grow.’ *Jubilees* 11:13–18 tells us

The Parable of the Leaven

In this way, the teaching of the parable seems to be that **the kingdom is growing among other “plants”** or kingdoms of the world. And **before it’s over, this plant becomes deadly to them.** How that will be the case is something we will look at in a moment. But first, what are these other kingdom-plants? In the context, one of those plants could be Rome. Another is the religious system of Israel. Yes, Jesus’ plant started small and seemingly insignificant, but once planted, it would not be rooted out. Once growing, it would expand throughout the garden and would not be stopped. That doesn’t mean the gardeners of this world won’t try to get rid of it. They will. But that’s the war. **The mustard seed is invading** through botanical warfare the other plants of the garden—bird against seed, plant against plant to see which will win.

that Abraham had a devil of a time keeping the birds away from his seeds. Yet the danger of birds is already emphasized by the parable of the Sower (Mark 4:4b and par.)!” **Douglas E. Oakman**, *Jesus and the Peasants* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), ch. 9. He continues by going to the “field” rather than “garden” from Matthew and the fact that Mark does not say how the seed is actually sown (by a farmer or by nature?), “It is hard to escape the conclusion that Jesus deliberately likens the rule of God to a harvest time weed. The presence of the weed allows birds to roost and to meet their needs for food. Yet for the sown, the weed is no blessing. The plant promises to spoil the whole field when it reseeds itself. The birds will make off with at least part of the crop. As a metaphor for the reign of God, this “weed” stands over against the basic arrangements of civilization. It threatens the foundation of the edifice in its threat to the cultivated field.”

This is where **the complementary parable** comes in. “**To what shall I compare the kingdom of God?**” (**Luke 13:20**). This is basically the same as the way Jesus introduced the previous parable (**18**); therefore they seem to be teaching the same general idea (just like the series of parables on the value of the kingdom (1-99 sheep; 1-10 silver coins; 1-2 brothers).

“**It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened**” (**21**). Usually, it is the goodness or badness of the **leaven** that people want to focus on. “**See, she is leavening the whole thing, because through the kingdom, God is transforming the nations so that they will all be Christianized,**” the Postmillennialist says. “**No, leaven is evil as we see in other places. The point is that the kingdoms of the world are getting worse and worse and worse compared the kingdom of God,**” the Premillennialist responds.

But **Jesus doesn't actually say** that the leaven is good or bad here. Those are both guesses. What we can say for certain is that the leaven *is spreading* through the entire batch of dough. In other words, it is **invading** it. This then is how the two parables teach the same thing.

Once understood, neither the Greek nor the Jew would want this kingdom in their gardens. And, of course, **the next**

few weeks of Jesus' life on earth would bear this out, as both Jew and Greek would put him to death, a sentiment that continues throughout the kingdoms of the world to this day against Christ's church. They will do anything they can stop the influence of Christ's kingdom from spreading through their gardens.

This has necessary **implications** for our understanding of Christ and culture, church and state, kingdom and kingdom. For it is without question that if the mustard is being planted in a place like this, if the leaven is going through all the flour, then it means the kingdom is somehow not only *within* the gardens and breads of the world, but literally *doing something to them*. **What is it doing?** Without allegorizing that the birds refer to X and the size of the mustard to Y and so on, in context, it is **bringing healing** to those who submit to its king (i.e. the woman who was just healed and those who rejoiced with her) and **anger, resentment, fears of danger**, and other things to those who do not (i.e. the ruler of the synagogue, the Pharisees, Pilate and Herod, etc.). But this thought is also so tied to what who is in the kingdom, that we need to look at the second two parables briefly before finally returning to this question.

Who Is In The Kingdom (The Weeding Feast and Banquet)?

The **parable of the Wedding Feast** is about “those who were invited” (**Luke 14:7**). It begins with a **moral teaching** about not taking the places of honor when you are invited, lest someone more distinguished than you come and take your place, thus bringing you to shame for your impudence (**8-9**). Instead, go and sit at the lowest place, so that if the host tells you to move to a higher place, you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table (**10**). It then ends with a very important indicator of **those who will actually be in the kingdom**—“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (**11**). This strongly hints as the occupants of the kingdom.

The **parable of the Banquet** comes on its heels and teases out the fact that God at first invited many people (**16-17**). These many are likened **friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbors** (**12**). This, he said to the Pharisees who invited Jesus to his home that very hour (**1**). But all those “friends” were too busy (**18-20**) in their own personal kingdoms to be bothered by the banquet of God (**15**). One had just bought a

field, another a team of oxen, and another had just gotten married.

So **the master became angry** at those he had invited and told his servant to go and tell **the poor and crippled and blind and lame** to come from all over the town (21). They would be welcomed. Since there were not enough of them to fill the hall (22), word was sent out beyond the town, to the nooks and crannies, the highways and the hedges that whoever wanted to come to the banquet was welcome (23). Then, because the hall was full, none of those who were originally invited would be allowed into the banquet, for they spurned the invitation (24). As Matthew puts it in the parallel, though many were called, few were chosen (**Matt 22:14**).

It seems pretty clear from the context that the “friends” were the lawyers, the scribes, the **Pharisees**, the priests, the leaders of Israel and any who follow them and want to be like them. The poor and crippled seem to be (mostly) **Jews** throughout Israel whom Jesus is healing. And those at the end must be anyone else, namely, **Gentiles** from wherever they are.

These important parables teach us what the kingdom of God is like, and **particularly, who is in the kingdom**. It is

very clear that **those in the kingdom of God are those who receive the invitation of the Servant**—Christ to come and sup with him at table and to participate in the wedding feast of God’s Son through faith. To put this in terms we find later in Acts, the kingdom of God is made up of people who we call the church.

This means, by definition, that **no country can be the kingdom**, for there are many in all countries that do not call upon Christ at all and don’t even pretend to. (Remember, later, Jesus will say you can’t observe the kingdom or see it or travel to it, but the kingdom is within you; **Luke 17:21**). Returning for just a moment to our discussion of Christian nationalism, those who confuse America (or Israel) or any other nation with the kingdom of God are sadly and dangerously confused. And those who rail against any kind of worship of America and a political Savior are right to do so, though I honestly have to say **I’ve never met such a person** and wonder who in the world these people actually are. But, for sake of argument, I’ll agree somewhere there are probably such people and they have a misguided notion about American exceptionalism, as if America is the kingdom of God (and Trump or whoever—but let’s get real, it’s *always* Trump in the rhetoric—is their Messiah).

It is rather **the church, not a nation**, that is composed exclusively of people who confess to believe in Christ.²¹ Sure, most nations have people in them who confess Christ, but it isn't confessing Christ that is the *sine qua non* (essential component) of belonging to that nation. But it *is* of the church. That's the whole point of what the church is supposed to be, and when it is not that, it has sadly diluted itself to the point where it is indistinguishable from a country club or rock concert or any other event or institution within a nation. Which, of course, is what we see today in many so-called "churches" throughout the world and America.

But the idea of **the church and the kingdom also creates confusion**. Some people identify the kingdom *as* the church and the church *as* the kingdom, as if they are identical. They are not identical. In the parable, the kingdom of God is not "those who come to the banquet," rather, it includes the whole deal: those who come, the banquet, the man throwing the party, the land-building in which the party takes place, the occasion which the banquet is celebrating ... all of it.

²¹ Of course, their children also come to church, but they are not considered "the church" properly until they confess Christ. This does not mean they do not experience many blessings that come from being near to God's people, nor does it follow that God views them identically to Satan worshipers or something like that. But those are for another time.

Thinking Biblically about the Infiltration of the Kingdom of God

We are now able to clarify at least a couple of things regarding our understanding of what is a [proper view of Christ and culture](#), church and state, and so on. Let's take this idea that the kingdom of God exists in the same garden as other kingdoms. In other words, the kingdom of God is not the other kingdoms and they are not the kingdom of God. What implications does this have?

First, to reiterate, it is simply [biblically wrong to confuse any kingdom on this earth with the kingdom of God](#), including dare I say America or Israel—including Israel that exists today or Israel that existed in the OT. The OT nation of Israel was no more “the kingdom of God” than the church is. The kingdom of God came through it, just as it does the church, but it is bigger and purer than that. [There were always two Israels for example](#) (“[Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel](#)”; [Rom 9:6](#)). There is obviously overlap, and they overlap in different ways, but they are not identical. Knowing this should help inform anything from Zionism or a worship of the modern state of Israel to any kind of idolization and worship of America.

Second, the point that the kingdoms of the world are not the kingdom of God seems self-evident, until you realize that **Christians have sought to unite the two**, in different kinds of ways. On one hand, think **Holy Roman Empire, City on a Hill**, etc. At its best, the idea is to see the leaven of the church work its way into the culture (more below). At its worst, this can seek to transform the secular kingdoms of the world into the church, forcing conversions to name just one thing. There is **a converse** to this which is to create in the world **“Christianized” forms of everything** already in the world, so that you have Christian music, Christian art, Christian auto-shops, Christian malls, Christian restaurants, and so on. At its best, these seek to do secular activities with the controlling law of God and mind of Christ. At its worst, they are a failure to recognize that God is sovereign over culture, that he created culture, that the secular and mundane and unclean all belong to him and there is no need for them to be distinctively Christian. An octave in music and laws of thirds and fifths and minors and majors are made by God and are good for what they do whether you are a Satanist or Christian. The Satanist simply abuses the good thing for a wicked end, as they steal from God without giving him thanks.

The parable **does not teach** that the other kingdoms **will somehow transform into the kingdom of God** (via some forms or perhaps strawmen of Postmillennialism), but rather that the kingdom of God will *infiltrate* those other plants and starve them out as it becomes larger than all others. But how does the kingdom of God do this to the other plants?

This is the essential point and perhaps the most practical thing we can learn today. **I think that people believe** it will happen politically, militarily, and sometimes history has borne out that this is precisely what Christians have tried to do, and that's a main reason why God's kingdom is so despised. But **biblically speaking**, it does it in two ways, using the parables themselves as guides. **First**, the mustard seed, is by its very nature what it is. It will simply grow up to be a mustard plant. It doesn't need someone to make it become that. So the question is simply, will it grow or will it starve? I suggest that the world, because it hates the plant, seeks to either starve it of nutrients or pulls it out like a weed. That's how it deals with the plant.

But **God's ways of growing this plant** is that it receives the proper nutrients and water from the soil of the law and the gospel. When the plant is being **watered with the word** and grows in the fertile soil of the transforming power of the

Gospel—that simple message that Jesus is the God-man who was born King of kings and has done all things necessary for us and our salvation and growth in godliness, then the plant can't help but be what it is. It grows, people are saved.

I think one thing many people are doing is **refusing to believe that the kingdom of God will actually grow** with the simple means of grace God has given to it. So, they try to water it with other things, things that are poisonous to the plant, but work to grow other kinds of plants. I think **many people also refuse** to believe that with the right food and water, the plant simply will grow just like Jesus says that it will. So, they try to force it to grow of their own accord or whatever.

But the simplest most faithful thing we can do is **water the kingdom plant with the basic truths of the Scripture** that God has given for our faith and growth in Christ and believe him that he will do the rest. That's literally what Paul said (God gave the growth; **1Cor 3:6**).

When we do this, then something else becomes **inevitable**. That growth, because it is planted in a garden where all the other kingdoms of the world are also growing, begins to take over the other plants. But how?

Believe it or not, here I want to suggest that I do not think one group of Christians necessarily has the corner on the market. We all have different views of a Christian's relationship to the state. And many seem adamant that theirs is the only possible view to have and that all others are heretical. Some are, but not all.

Let me return to Christian nationalism as we conclude. It is very strange to me that those most opposed to Christian nationalism today use rhetoric closely aligned with social justice in their outlook on Christ and culture. They blast "Christian nationalists" as being political and confusing the two kingdoms, while they simultaneously promote woke cultural Marxist ideals that infiltrate the culture under the ruse that this is just what the Bible says for all Christians—that they aren't being political at all. I suggest that these people who say they are against Christians confusing church and state cannot themselves escape the inevitability that the church and state necessarily interact. They just aren't being very honest about it.

But the facts are, if I'm a Christian and I live in the world, then I have, in whatever way God has given me in my situation in life—be it a pastor or a mother or a truck driver or a school teacher—an influence on the culture and

this influence comes to the culture, inevitably, through my being a Christian who belongs to another kingdom and I can't help but be who I am. I can't help but influence the culture, even if it is just a little or for good or for bad or for right or for wrong.

Amazingly, **in our particular country**, the Founders told us that the country only works if the citizens are informed about history and government *and* actively involved in it themselves, mostly on the local level. So, we actually have the green light from both a religious and political point of view to be active in our government, as salt and light. That's Christian nationalism in the best sense, as defined earlier. The same goes for the church, though it takes us too far afield to go into much detail about it here. I'll simply say that **the idea that the church should never say anything political is absurd**, because the moment you speak about anything moral, you are being political, not because it is political in itself, but because the kingdoms of the world live under God's natural law and must live according to transcendent morals that run the universe. While it can be a confusion of kingdoms to bring politics into the pulpit, **it can also be a confusion over the nature of the kingdoms *not* to.**

My point here is to say that as the church grows strong through the means of grace, it will inevitably interact with the other plants of the garden. Some who come to the garden will see this amazing mustard plant and remember that it has **incredible medicinal value** for all manner of infirmaries. And they will flock to the plant to be healed by Christ.

Others will see the plant **as an intruder**, one which is destroying the other plants of the garden, though the reality is, those plants will always still grow in this world, and they all can in fact benefit from the shade it provides as the Gardener prunes the Mustard Plant and allows it to have a beneficial impact even on them. For their interpretation of the Mustard Plant is in fact incorrect, as the point of this great kingdom of God is that it inevitably and necessarily reforms the institutions of man because Christians are in them, making them better until that day when Christ returns and rules over the new heavens and earth in his perfect kingdom, **subduing all** the fallen institutions and bringing them all into alignment with his will.

Until that day, let us learn the lessons of the kingdom as given to us through these parables. Let us trust more in Christ's church and love her. Let us believe in God's power to grow her. Let us seek to invite all to the banquet. Let us

seek to grow side by side the plants of this world, not retreating from them, not seeking to Christianize them, not failing to speak truth to them, not refusing to be involved in them. For God has planted his kingdom squarely in this big garden. He has put us in it and not taken us out of it. It is time the church learns to think better about these things, with more optimism, more honesty, less attacking of one another and even demonizing each other on non-essentials, and realize that the most important thing is that [we entreat all men to come to God's kingdom](#), for it is a delight and a treasure the likes of which the kingdoms of the world cannot comprehend.

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