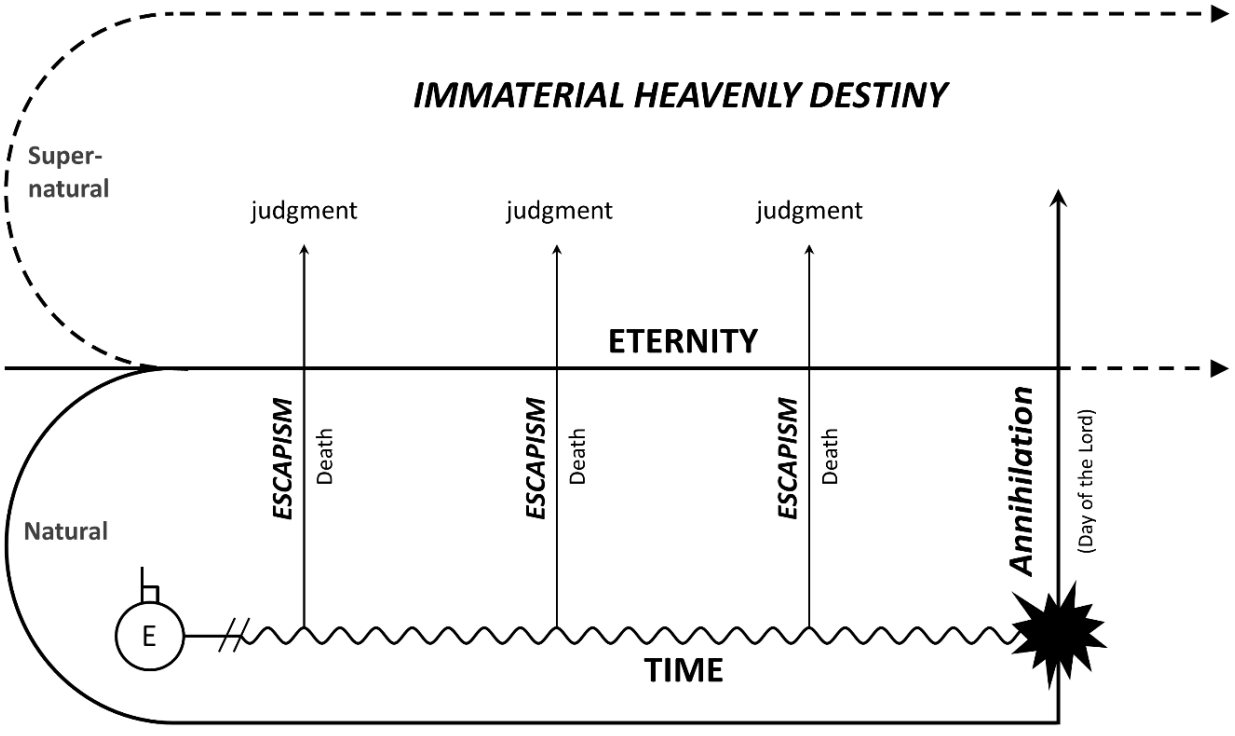
Session 2: Competing Narratives of Redemptive History

I. **Jewish Narrative** (Monistic Cosmology + Apocalyptic Soteriology = "Jewish Apocalypticism")

"We can distill from this mass of writings a general pattern of End-time events, themselves amplifications of themes shaping the older prophetic paradigm of Exile and Return. Before the End comes, the righteous will suffer persecution at the hands of the wicked. Suddenly, though, things will begin to reverse. The Day of the Lord will arrive, when the world will be convulsed by celestial and terrestrial catastrophes: earthquakes, plagues, darkness at noon, falling stars… With the resurrection of the dead, the judgment of the wicked, and the vindication of the righteous, Israel will reassemble, all twelve tribes, and return to the Land. God's spirit will pour out onto 'all flesh' (Joel 2:28). The redeemed will gather in Jerusalem, at a rebuilt or renewed temple. Peace unalterably established, the entire world, human and divine, will acknowledge and worship the god of Israel."[1]

II. **Greek Narrative** (Dualistic Cosmology + Escapist Soteriology = "Christoplatonism")

"Origen clearly represents and develops a construction of the Christian faith in which eschatology has been swallowed up in an emphasis upon transcendence. The only time which truly matters is that time until one's death, which determines one's experience in paradise and in the resurrection. 'Heaven' as cosmographic place now occupies the central position once occupied by the eschatological kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching. That, too, occurs on the authority of progressive dialectics, the refinement of Pauline metaphysics."[2]



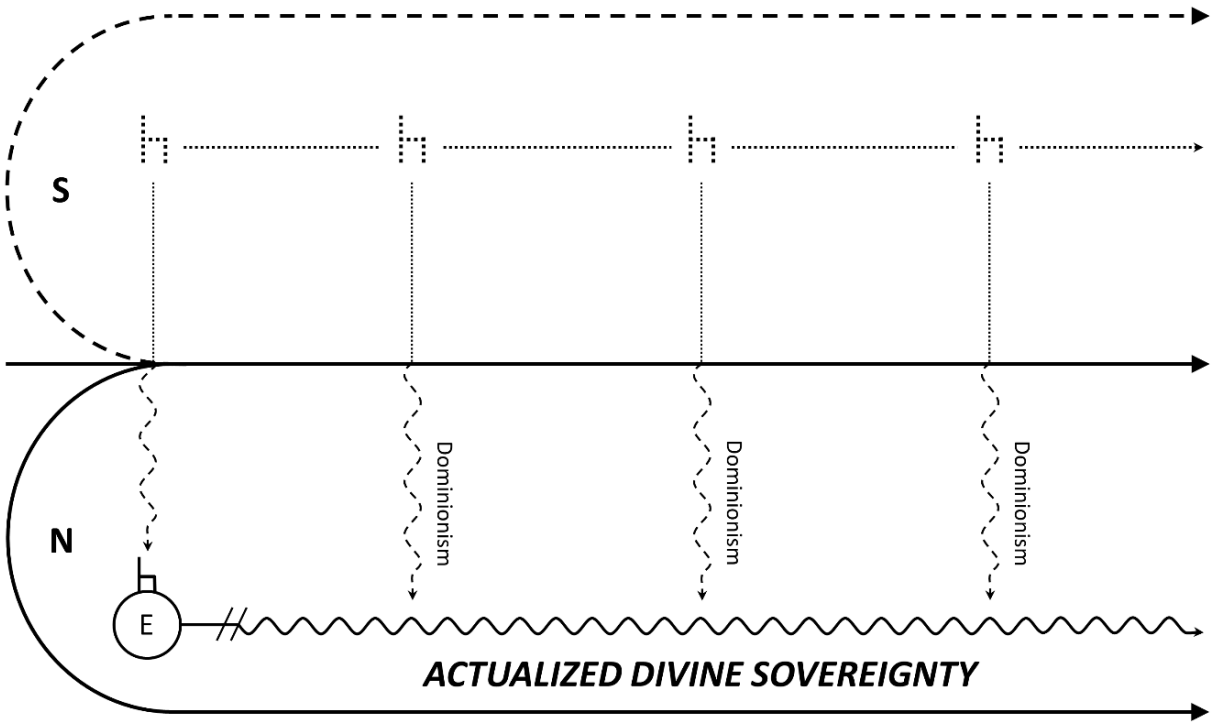
[1] Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 27.

[2] Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, *Jewish and Christian Doctrines: The Classics Compared* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 183.

"Having sketched, then, so far as we could understand, these three opinions regarding the end of all things, and the supreme blessedness… we must suppose that an incorporeal existence is possible, after all things have become subject to Christ, and through Christ to God the Father, when God will be all and in all… then the bodily substance itself also being united to most pure and excellent spirits, and being changed into an ethereal condition in proportion to the quality or merits of those who assume it (according to the apostle's words, 'We also shall be changed'), will shine forth in splendour; or at least that when the fashion of those things which are seen passes away, and all corruption has been shaken off and cleansed away, and when the whole of the space occupied by this world, in which the spheres of the planets are said to be, has been left behind and beneath, then is reached the fixed abode of the pious and the good situated above that sphere, which is called non-wandering (απλανής), as in a good land, in a land of the living, which will be inherited by the meek and gentle… which is called truly and chiefly 'heaven,' in which heaven and earth, the end and perfection of all things, may be safely and most confidently placed."[3]

III. Roman Narrative (Dualistic Cosmology + Dominionistic Soteriology = "Constantinianism")

"And thus, by the express appointment of the same God, two roots of blessing, the Roman empire, and the doctrine of Christian piety, sprang up together for the benefit of men… In short, the ancient oracles and predictions of the prophets were fulfilled, more numerous than we can at present cite, and those especially which speak as follows concerning the saving Word. 'He shall have dominion from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth.' And again, 'In his days shall righteousness spring up; and abundance of peace.' 'And they shall beat their swords into plough-shares, and their spears into sickles: and nation shall not take up sword against nation, neither shall they learn to war any more.' These words, predicted ages before in the Hebrew tongue, have received in our own day a visible fulfillment, by which the testimonies of the ancient oracles are clearly confirmed."[4]



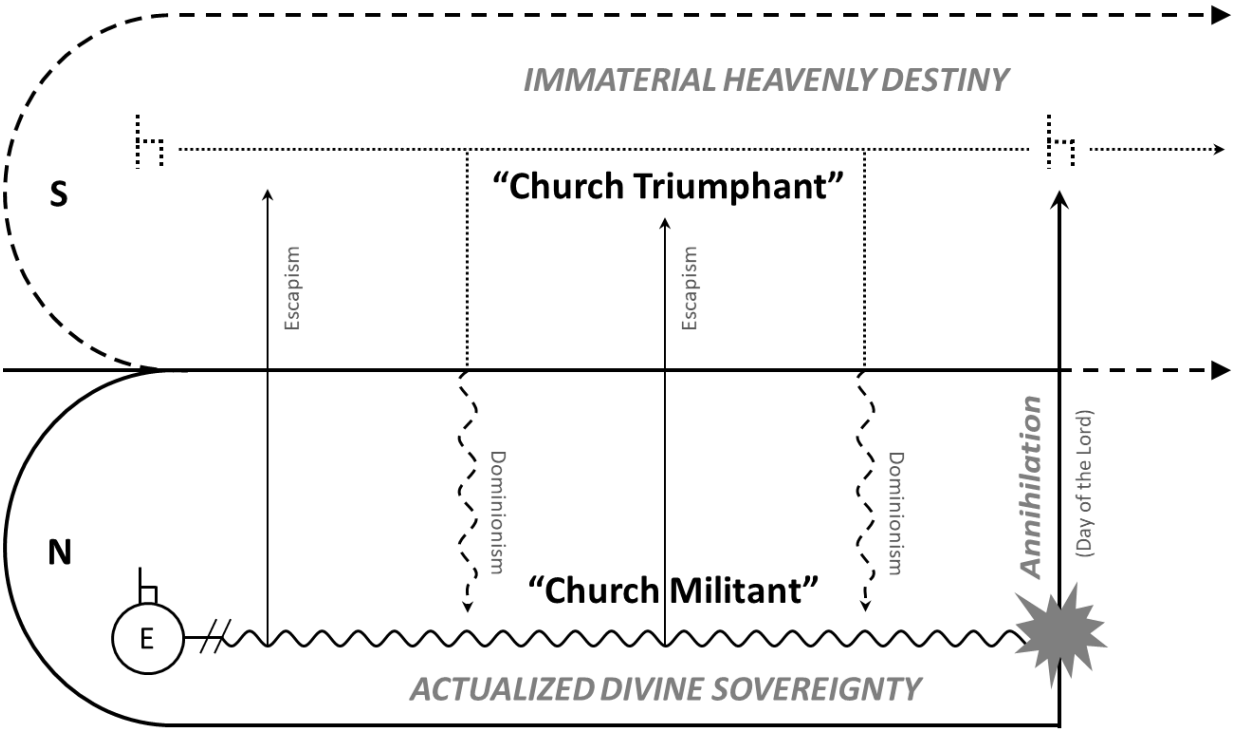
[3] Origen, *On First Principles* 2.3.7 (*Ante-Nicene Fathers* 4:274–75).

[4] Eusebius of Caesarea, *Oration in Praise of Constantine* 16.4–8 (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, 1:606–7).

IV. Augustinian Synthesis (Greek Narrative + Roman Narrative)

"The Middle Ages on the whole did not understand well the this-worldly future dimension of the kingdom of God. This was so due to three factors: a widespread ignorance of the apocalyptic Jewish background of this expectation, together with an acute Platonizing longing for the eternal, for a place outside of time and history. This is the first factor. To it we must add the Augustinian transformation of the kingdom into the church militant and triumphant, and lastly the imperial ideology of the Christian empire as the kingdom of God on earth."[5]

"It must be pointed out that the interpretation of the future eschatological dimension of the hope has been largely a stream of misinterpretation in the history of the church. To be sure, both Albert Schweitzer and Martin Werner have drawn attention to the de-eschatologizing of the early Christian message in the history of the church. However, their basic insights have until recently been neglected by systematic theology and biblical scholarship alike. The history of futurist eschatology in the church has been one long process of spiritualization and/or ecclesiologizing or institutionalizing, especially under the influence of Origen and Augustine. From the condemnation of Montanism in the second century and the exclusion of chiliastic apocalypticism at the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431) through its condemnation by the reformers (in the Augsburg Confession) and until today, future eschatology was pushed out of the mainstream of church life and thus pushed into heretical aberrations. The impact of this spiritualizing process and the distaste for apocalyptic speculations made by sectarian groups have no doubt contributed to the overwhelmingly negative estimate of apocalyptic by biblical and theological scholarship since the Enlightenment."[6]



[5] Benedict T. Viviano, *The Kingdom of God in History* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), 57.

[6] J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 138–39.

V. British Narrative (Monistic Cosmology + Naturalistic Soteriology)

"At present no other theological influence so hampers and obstructs the social gospel as that of eschatology. All considerations taken from the life of the twentieth century cry out for something like the social gospel; but the ideas of the first century contained in eschatology are used to veto it. Those who have trained their religious thinking on the Hebrew prophets and the genuine teachings of Jesus are for the social gospel; those who have trained it on apocalyptic ideas are against it." [7]

"The cosmology of the New Testament is essentially mythical in character. The world is viewed as a three-storied structure, with the earth in the centre, the heaven above, and the underworld beneath. Heaven is the abode of God and of celestial beings—the angels. The underworld is hell, the place of torment… All this is the language of mythology, and the origin of the various themes can be easily traced in the contemporary mythology of Jewish Apocalyptic… Can Christian preaching expect modern man *to accept the mythical view of the world as true*? To do so would be both senseless and impossible. It would be senseless, because there is nothing specifically Christian in the mythical view of the world as such. It is simply the cosmology of a pre-scientific age. Again, it would be impossible, because no man can adopt a view of the world by his own volition—it is already determined for him by his place in history."[8]

"It is, of course, true that de-mythologizing takes the modern world-view as a criterion. To de-mythologize is to reject not Scripture or the Christian message as a whole, but the world-view of Scripture, which is the world-view of a past epoch, which all too often is retained in Christian dogmatics and in the preaching of the Church. To de-mythologize is to deny that the message of Scripture and of the Church is bound to an ancient world-view which is obsolete. The attempt to de-mythologize begins with this important insight: Christian preaching, in so far as it is preaching of the Word of God by God's command and in His name, does not offer a doctrine which can be accepted either by reason or by a *sacrificium intellectus*. Christian preaching is *kerygma*, that is, a proclamation addressed not to the theoretical reason, but to the hearer as a self."[9]

VI. Dispensational Synthesis (Greek Narrative + Jewish Narrative)

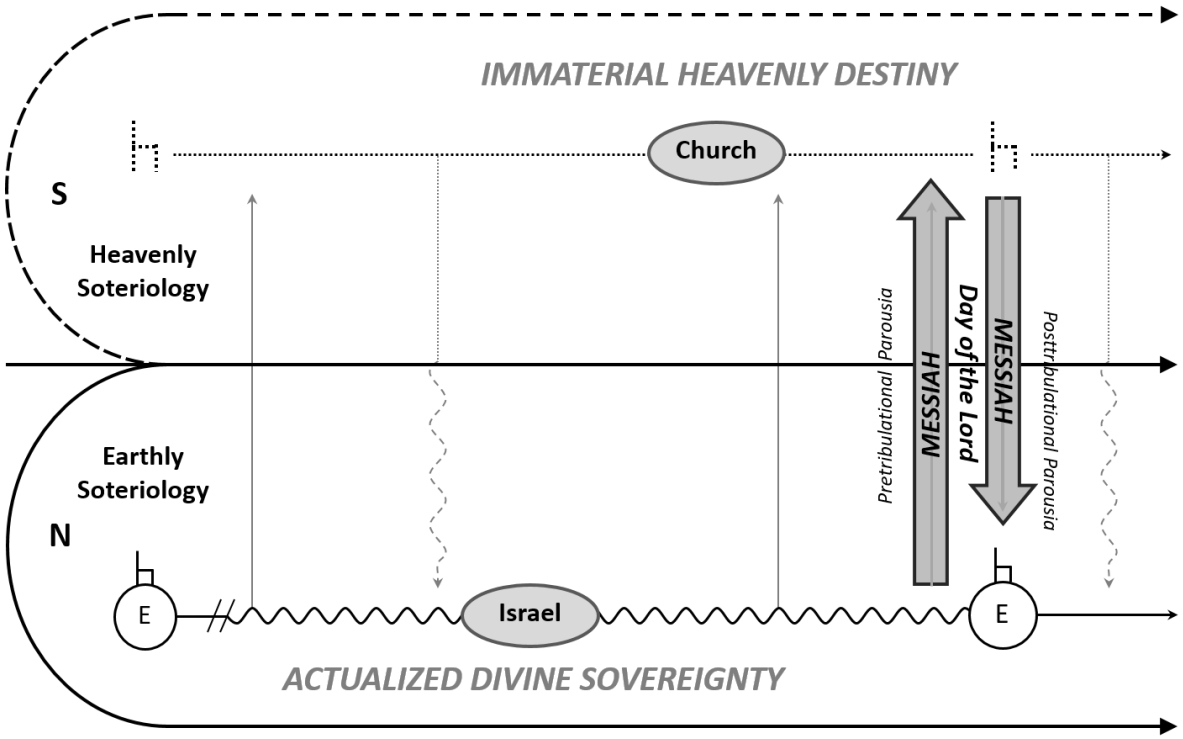
"The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing *two distinct purposes*: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved, while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved. Why should this belief be deemed so incredible in the light of the facts that there is a present distinction between earth and heaven which is preserved even after both are made new; when the Scriptures so designate an earthly people who go on as such into eternity; and an heavenly people who also abide in their heavenly calling forever? Over against this, the partial dispensationalist, though dimly observing a few obvious distinctions, bases his interpretation on the supposition that God is doing but one thing, namely, the general separation of the good from the bad, and, in spite of all the confusion this limited theory creates, contends that the earthly people merge into the heavenly people; that the earthly program must be given a spiritual interpretation or disregarded altogether; and that there is nothing in eternity but heaven and hell. The advocates of this interpretation oppose every earthly feature of the divine program. They disregard or ignore the earthly covenants and promises; they spiritualize or vaporize the vast body of Scripture bearing on the Davidic Throne and Kingdom; they present

[7] Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 210.

[8] Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. H. W. Bartsch (London: SPCK, 1953), 1–4; italics in the original.

[9] Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 35–36.

no specific reason as to why Christ was born as the Son of David; and they recognize no earthly glory or purpose in His second advent. According to their system, Christ comes again to end the world, but, unfortunately for these conceptions, the world does not end then or ever."[10]



VII. Inaugurational Synthesis (Roman Narrative + Jewish Narrative)

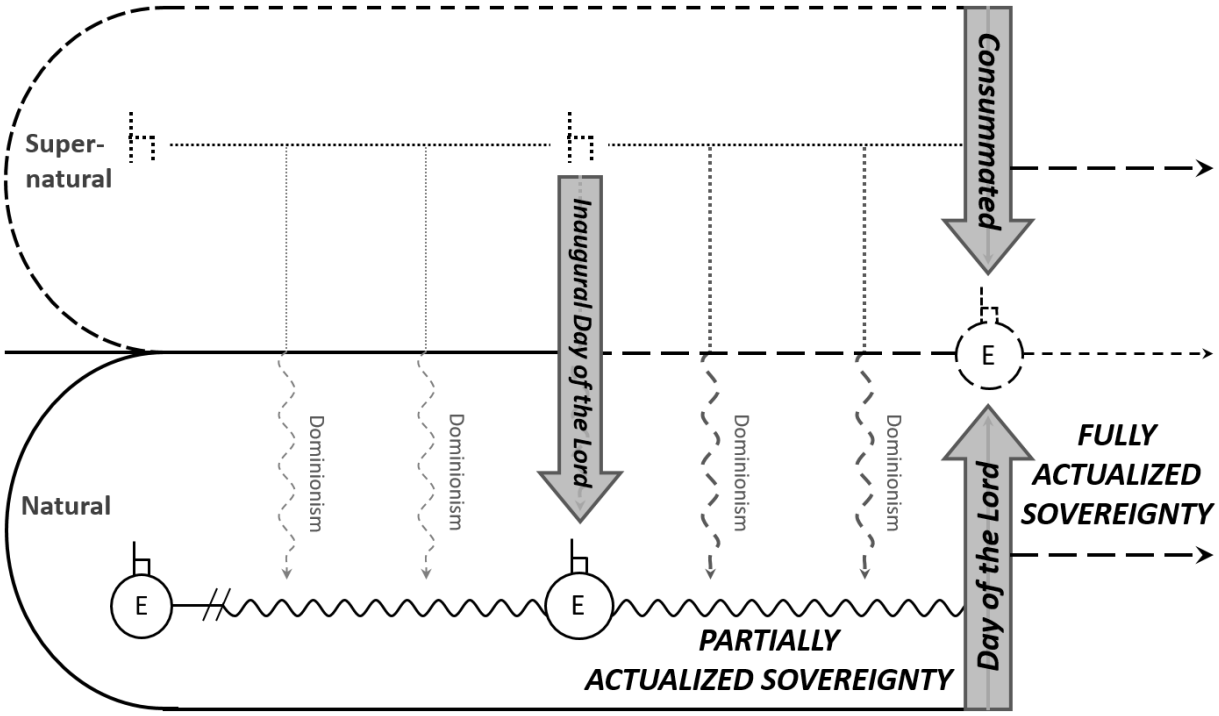
"The 'history' of the kingdom of God is therefore the history of redemption, viewed from the aspect of God's sovereign and kingly power. Before the final and perfect establishment of God's reign there could be a number of mediatorial stages in which the manifestation of God's sovereignty is realized in varying degrees. God's reign may be realized less perfectly, partially, but none-the-less really in various realms during the course of this age and before the perfect fulfillment in the age to come. The character of these several mediatorial manifestations of God's kingdom can be determined only by careful exegesis of the Scriptural language."[11]

"This is why the Second Coming of Christ is necessary—to complete the work begun in his Incarnation. There are, in other words, two great events in God's conquest of the powers of evil, two invasions of God into history: the Incarnation and the Second Coming. One scholar has illustrated this by an analogy from World War II. There were two steps in the victory over Nazi Germany: D-Day and V-Day. Once the allies had launched a successful invasion upon the continent and the allied armies had secured a foothold and started their drive across France, the tide of battle turned. The allies were advancing, Germany was in retreat. But there

[10] Lewis S. Chafer, "Dispensationalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 93 (1936): 448; article reprinted as *Dispensationalism* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1936). See also Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965); and Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993).

[11] George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 84–85.

remained much bitter fighting, which lasted until the complete capitulation of the enemy—V-Day. Then the fighting ceased; peace reigned."[12]



"The identification of the Kingdom with the Church has led historically to ecclesiastical policies and programs which, even when not positively evil, have been far removed from the original simplicity of the New Testament *ekklēsia*. It is easy to claim that in the 'present kingdom of grace' the rule of the saints is wholly 'spiritual,' exerted only through moral principles and influence. But practically, once the Church becomes the Kingdom in any realistic theological sense, it is impossible to draw any clear line between principles and their implementation through political and social devises. For the logical implications of a present ecclesiastical *kingdom* are unmistakable, and historically have always led in only one direction, i.e., political control of the state by the Church. The distances down this road traveled by various religious movements, and the forms of control which were developed, have been widely different. The difference is very great between the Roman Catholic system and modern Protestant efforts to control the state; also between the ecclesiastical rule of Calvin in Geneva and the fanaticism of Münster and the English 'fifth-monarchy.' But the basic assumption is always the same: The Church in some sense is the Kingdom, and therefore has a divine right to rule; or it is the business of the Church to 'establish' fully the Kingdom of God among men. Thus the Church loses its 'pilgrim' character and the sharp edge of its divinely commissioned 'witness' is blunted."[13]

[12] George E. Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 47; cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1936); Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, trans. F. V. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950); Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans. H. de Jongste (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962); Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996); Arthur F. Glasser et al., *Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God's Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); and G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

[13] Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1959), 438.