

The Coming Kingdom, Part 10

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Because today's evangelical world believes that the church is experiencing the messianic kingdom, we began a study chronicling what the Bible teaches about the kingdom. This earthly kingdom is anticipated in the office of Theocratic Administrator that was lost in Eden, in the biblical covenants, in the predictions of the Old Testament prophets, and in the earthly theocracy governing Israel from the time of Moses to Zedekiah. This theocratic arrangement terminated with the initiation of the "Times of the Gentiles" when the nation had no king reigning on David's Throne as Judah was trampled by various Gentile powers. Against that backdrop entered Jesus Christ, the rightful Heir to David's Throne. Had first-century Israel enthroned Christ, the earthly kingdom would have become a reality. Despite this unprecedented opportunity, Israel rejected the kingdom offer (Matt. 12) leading to the kingdom's postponement. Due to this postponement, Christ began to explain the spiritual conditions that would prevail during the kingdom's absence. This interim program includes His revelation of the kingdom mysteries (Matt. 13) and the church (Matt. 16:18). Regarding the kingdom mysteries of Matthew 13, as explained in previous articles, when the parables of Matthew 13 are understood together, we can gain a picture of the course of the present "mystery age."

The second aspect of the interim phase during the Messianic kingdom's postponement is Christ's revelation of the church (Matt. 16:18). The church consists of all people, including both the Jewish remnant as well as Gentiles, who have trusted in the very Messiah Israel rejected. Unlike Israel, which was a national identity, the church is a spiritual organism consisting of all nations and ethnicities (Gal. 3:28; Rom. 10:19; Eph. 2:14). The church age began on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 and will conclude with the future rapture of the church from the earth. Rather than replacing Israel, the church represents an entirely new divine work that interrupts God's past dealings and future dealings with national Israel.

THE CHURCH IS NOT THE KINGDOM

What is critical to understand is that God's present work in and through the church is not to be confused with God's program concerning the coming kingdom. Several reasons lead us to this conclusion.¹ First, Christ is nowhere directly called the king of the church. Although He is referred to as the head of His body the church (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18) or the groom of His bride the church (Eph. 5:25), He is never specifically designated as the king of His church. Second, there exists a lack of correspondence between what Scripture predicts concerning the coming kingdom and the present spiritual realities in the Church Age. For example, during the kingdom, Christ will rule the world with a

¹ Kevin Quick, "The Glory of the Kingdom," online: www.kevinquick.com, accessed 10 August 2012, 718-27.

rod of iron (Ps. 2:9; Rev. 12:5) resulting in immediate justice against any sin or wrong doing (Zech. 14:16-18; Rev. 20:7-10). The Church Age, by contrast, is often characterized by carnality and a low standard of Christian living (1 Cor. 3:1-3). Hebrews 5:12 describes the reality of such prolonged carnality: “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.” Interestingly, of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2–3, Christ rebuked all but two of them for their backslidden condition. Walvoord capsulizes this lack of correspondence between the prophesied kingdom and the present church age: “The Christian era has been no golden age of righteousness nor has the church conquered the world. It is more accurate to recognize that the world has to a large degree possessed the church.”² Some contend that the church is the kingdom since Christ is reigning in our hearts. However, the spiritual reign of Christ in the heart of the believer is not identical to the terrestrial kingdom promises found throughout Scripture (Gen. 15:18-21; Rev. 5:10). Besides, does Christ perfectly reign in the hearts of the believer today? If so, why are there consistent commands given in the New Testament against grieving (Eph. 4:30) and quenching the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19)? The mere existence of these commands implies that believers have the capacity to commit these sins and consequently inhibit the reigning influence of God in their hearts.

Third, the inauguration of the kingdom is preceded by the proclamation to Israel “repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand” (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:5-7; 24:14). Such a proclamation bears little resemblance to the church’s gospel, which is for all to believe on the name of Jesus Christ in order to experience God’s grace (Acts 16:30-31). Pentecost explains, “The new command of Christ, ‘Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth’ (Acts 1:8) does not coincide with the gospel of the kingdom which must precede the institution of the kingdom.”³ Feinberg similarly notes, “When men are invited to receive the grace of God in salvation today, they are not urged, ‘Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”⁴

Fourth, the New Testament consistently portrays the church as an heir of the coming kingdom as opposed to a ruler in a present existing kingdom (Acts 14:22; 2 Thess. 1:5; 2 Tim. 4:18; 2 Pet. 1:11). James 2:5 says, “Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world *to be* rich in faith and *heirs of the kingdom* which He promised to those who love Him?” (italics added). Premillennial scholar Peters asks, “If the church is the Kingdom, and believers are now in it, why designate them ‘heirs,’ etc., of a Kingdom.”⁵

Fifth, rather than reigning in kingdom glory, the Scripture predicts the church’s present posture as suffering within a hostile world system (John 15:18-19; Rom. 13:12; 2 Tim. 3:12). Peters explains, “The

² John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1959), 53.

³ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1958; reprint, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1964), 469.

⁴ Charles Feinberg, *Millennialism: The Two Major Views* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1985), 266.

⁵ George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, vol. 1 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1952), 1:600.

church, instead of being represented as a Kingdom, is held up to us as a struggling, suffering people.”⁶ Sixth, the kingdom will be a time in history where there will be no Satanic influence. In fact, the devil will be incarcerated throughout this glorious age (Rev. 20:2-3). Such a scenario hardly fits the consistent New Testament description of Satan’s repeated influence against and within the church (1 Thess. 2:18; 1 Cor. 7:5; Eph. 4:26-27; 6:12; Rev 2:10).

Seventh, according to the revelation of the Times of the Gentiles as given to the prophet Daniel (Dan. 2; 7), the earthly theocracy terminated with the deposing of Zedekiah in 586 B.C. and will not return until the Second Advent (Matt. 25:31). As explained in an earlier article, during this period known as the Times of the Gentiles, Judah will be trampled down by various Gentile powers. Only after the final kingdom of man (the revived Roman Empire of the Antichrist) has been terminated by Christ, will God’s kingdom be established on earth (Dan. 2:34-35; 43-45; 7:23-27). Thus, during the Times of the Gentiles, no spiritual form of the kingdom on earth is predicted by Daniel. Because the Church Age is included in the Times of the Gentiles, neither can the Church Age be considered part of the kingdom. Larkin summarizes, “As the ‘Times of the GENTILES’ is still running, the Church cannot be in this Dispensation a governing or Kingdom power.”⁷

THE CHURCH IS NOT ISRAEL

Another reason that the church should not be confused with the kingdom is that the kingdom program revolves around national Israel. The New Testament never designates the church as "Israel." In fact, the word Israel is found seventy-three times in the New Testament and it always refers to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.⁸ Sometimes Israel in the New Testament refers to Jews in faith and sometimes it refers to Jews in unbelief. However, the term Israel in the New Testament always refers to those who are physical Jews. This word never refers to Gentiles, the Church, or even a group that is a mixture of both Jews and Gentiles. This generalization even holds true with respect to the oft cited Galatians 6:16 passage. Exegetically, the expression "Israel of God" found in Galatians 6:16 only refers to believing Jews within the Galatian churches.⁹

Furthermore, the Book of Acts records how the church that came into existence in Acts 2 and continued to exist alongside Israel prior to the nation's destruction in A.D. 70. Throughout this period, Acts is judicious in keeping the two entities the Church and Israel separate. Fruchtenbaum observes, "In the book of Acts, both Israel and the church exist simultaneously. The term *Israel* is used twenty times and *ekklesia* (church) nineteen times, yet the two groups are always kept distinct."¹⁰ An additional reason that Israel is not the church is due to the fact that the church and Israel represent

⁶ Ibid., 1:617.

⁷ Clarence Larkin, *Dispensational Truth* (Philadelphia, PA: Larkin Estate, 1920), 18.

⁸ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Tustin, CA: Ariel, 1994), 684-90.

⁹ S. Lewis Johnson, "Paul and the 'Israel of God': An Exegetical and Eschatological Case-Study," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed. Stanley D. Toussaint and Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 181-96.

¹⁰ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Israel and the Church," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 118.

separate programs of God. They are two trains running on separate railroad tracks. Theologian and founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, Lewis Sperry Chafer, noted twenty-four differences between Israel and the church,¹¹ which will be highlighted in the next article.

(To Be Continued...)



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¹¹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1948; reprint, [8 vols. in 4], Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 4:47-53.