

The Coming Kingdom, Part 9

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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."

BEGINNING OF THE CHURCH 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. Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, used the expression "intercalation" to describe God's work in the present Church Age.¹ This phrase simply means an interruption, interpolation, or interval. This concept best describes what God is presently doing through the church. He is not currently fulfilling Israel's kingdom promises in any sense. He will fulfill these promises in the future kingdom. Rather, in the present, He is doing an entirely new work through the church that interrupts God's past dealings and future dealings with national Israel.

There are at least four reasons for believing that the church began in Acts 2.² First, the initial reference to the church is found in Christ's prophecy in Matthew 16:18, which says, "I will build My church." Interestingly, the verb translated "I will build" (*oikodomeo*) is in the future tense, thereby indicating

¹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1948), 4:41.

² Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 463, 66.

that the church did not exist either contemporaneously with or before He made the statement. In other words, the church was destined to come into existence in the future and therefore did not exist in either the Old Testament era or during the time of Christ.

Second, the concept of the church, or a new spiritual organism consisting of both believing Jews and Gentile as co-heirs with equal spiritual status, is categorized by the New Testament as a mystery (Eph. 2:14-15; 3:9). This word "mystery" simply means a previously unknown truth now disclosed (Rom. 16:25-26; Col. 1:26). Vine explains, "In the N.T, it [*mysterion*] denotes, not the mysterious (as with the Eng. word), but that which, being outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known only by Divine revelation, and is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God, and to those who are illumined by His Spirit."³ Because the church itself is a mystery, it is something that could not have existed in previous eras. Thus, Paul designated the church as a "new man" (Eph. 2:15).

Third, the church could not have existed prior to Christ's Ascension (Acts 1). Christ is the head of the church (Eph. 5:23). He did not assume this position until after His Resurrection and Ascension (Eph. 1:20-22). Thus, the church could not have existed prior to His Ascension. If the church had existed prior to this point in time, it would have been functioning with no head. Similarly, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are necessary in order for the church to experience edification (1 Cor. 12:7; 14:26b). Yet, these gifts did not come into existence until after the Ascension (Eph. 4:7-11). Had the church existed before this point, it would have existed without the means of being built up and edified. Thus, when all the data is considered, it is easy to see why the church could not have existed prior to Acts 1.

Fourth, the baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit began in Acts 2. This ministry involves the Spirit's work in taking men and women at the point of personal faith in Christ and uniting them with the body of Christ, the church. First Corinthians 12:13 says, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." The verb baptize (*baptizo*) simply means to identify. Such spiritual identification is not something that the believer must seek. Rather, it is something that the Spirit has already performed in the believer's life at the moment of conversion.

If we can pinpoint when the Spirit's work of uniting Christians with Christ's body, the church, began, we can similarly identify when the church or the body of Christ began. In other words, when did the Spirit begin to form the body of Christ and initiate His work of uniting believers with this new spiritual body called the church? This work must have started some time after the Ascension. Just before He ascended, Christ put the baptizing work of the Spirit into the future. He explained to the disciples, "for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5). The church also must have started some time prior to Acts 11:15-16. Here, Peter put the

³ W. E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Nelson, 1996), 424.

launching of the Spirit's baptizing ministry into the past. In Acts 11:15-16, while seeking to validate the conversion of Cornelius, the first Gentile believer (Acts 10), he testified to the Jerusalem church, "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as *He did* upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'"

Thus, the Spirit's baptizing ministry began some time after Acts 1:5 but before Acts 11:15-16. The only event between these two verses that could logically describe the Spirit's baptizing ministry is Acts 2. Here, the Spirit descended upon the disciples (Acts 2:1-4), and about three thousand people were saved (Acts 2:37-41). When all of the Scripture is considered, we can surmise that the church, the body of Christ, began on the Day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2. It is at this specific point in time that the Spirit began taking believers in Christ and uniting them into a new spiritual organism called the body of Christ or the church.

The church, which began in Acts 2, exists for three specific, divinely-ordained reasons. First, the church exists to glorify God (Eph. 3:21). Second, the church exists to edify or build up its members. God has placed spiritual gifts in the body of Christ for the purpose of being faithfully employed so that the church members can be built up, become spiritually mature, and reach unity (Eph. 4:11-16). Third, the church exists for the purpose of accomplishing world evangelism (Mark 16:15) and to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). During this present Church Age, which has lasted roughly two thousand years so far, the church, rather than national Israel, comprises the preeminent servants of God on earth. During this time, God is busy "...taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name" (Acts 15:14).

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.⁴ 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. Such a glaring omission has long been recognized by dispensational, premillennial scholars. According to Peters: "Jesus is called, and by right, and in the covenanted manner, is, 'the King of the Jews,' 'King of Nations,' 'King of the World,' but is never called 'the King of the Church.'"⁵ Larkin similarly notes, "Christ is the 'Head' of His Church (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; Col. 1:18), but He is never spoken of as its King."⁶ McClain quotes Andrews as follows: "It is as its Head that He rules over it [the Church], not as its King; for this latter title is

⁴ For a more in depth treatment of this issue, see Kevin Quick, "The Glory of the Kingdom," online: www.kevinquick.com, accessed 10 August 2012, 718-27.

⁵ George Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1952), 1:597.

⁶ Clarence Larkin, *Dispensational Truth* (Philadelphia, PA: Larkin Estate, 1920), 74.

never used of this relation.”⁷ Fruchtenbaum also observes, “The problem Amillennialism faces is that while the Bible portrays the relationship between Christ and the Church in various metaphors (head and body, groom and bride, vine and branches, foundation and stones of the building, etc.), king and kingdom is not one of them...Christ is indeed referred to as the head of the Church, but never its king.”⁸

(To Be Continued...)



⁷ Alva McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 437.

⁸ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel, 1994), 190.