

THE COMING KINGDOM, PART XI

by Andy Woods

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. As explained in previous articles, God's present work in and through the church is not to be confused with God's program concerning the coming kingdom. There are simply not enough points of correspondence between the New Testament church and what the Scripture predicts concerning the coming kingdom.

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.¹ Sometimes Israel in the New Testament refers to believing Jews 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. In other words, the term Israel is a technical term or a word that means the same thing everywhere it is employed in Scripture. 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.²

Furthermore, the Book of Acts records how the church, which came into existence in Acts 2, 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.

¹ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel, 1994), 684-90.

² 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.

The term *Israel* is used twenty times and *ekklesia* (church) nineteen times, yet the two groups are always kept distinct."³

THE CHURCH AND ISRAEL REPRESENT DIFFERENT PROGRAMS OF GOD

An additional reason that Israel is not the church is due to the fact that the church and Israel represent 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.⁴ Here are a few from Chafer's list and a few of my own.

First, Israel is the wife of Jehovah (Isa. 54:5) while the church is the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:22-33). Second, Israel gave birth to Christ (Rev. 12:1-5) whereas Christ gave birth to the church (Matt. 16:18). Third, Christ will return to rescue Israel upon her national conversion at the end of the Tribulation period (Matt. 23:37-39). Conversely, He will return to rescue the church at the rapture (John 14:1-3). Fourth, king-subject imagery is used to depict God's relationship to Israel (Isa. 33:22) while head and groom imagery is used to depict Christ's relationship with His church (Eph. 5:22-33). Fifth, God's program through Israel began in Genesis 12, and His program through the church began in Acts 2 (Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 12:13; Acts 1:5; 11:15-16).

Sixth, while four-fifths of the Bible pertains to Israel, only one-fifth of it deals with the church. Seventh, although Israel was a direct party to the biblical covenants (Jer. 31:31-32), the church was not a party to these covenants since the church was not yet in existence when these covenants were made. The church's relationship to these covenants can best be described as one

³ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Israel and the Church," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 118.

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

of a third-party beneficiary rather than a direct party to them. Therefore, the church benefits from the covenants as opposed to being a direct party to them. Eighth, Israel is a nation (Ps. 147:20). As such, she is always biblically portrayed as an independent nation with borders and a capital. Even today Israel is among the nations of the earth, just like Japan, Argentina, Canada, or any other country. By contrast, the church is not a nation (Rom 10:19) but rather is comprised of people from all nations (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-22; 3:6, 15). Rather than taking her seat among the nations of the earth, the church is a mere pilgrim in the world system (1 Pet. 2:11).

Ninth, while Israel fought physical wars with various enemies such as the Philistines, the church is engaged in spiritual warfare with angelic enemies (Eph. 6:10-20). Tenth, the Scripture assigns numerous *a quo* and *ad quem* statements to Israel (Gen. 15:13-16; Jer. 25:11; 29:10; Ezek. 4:5-7; Dan. 9:24-27). These are timing statements with a specific beginning and ending point for each period. One searches the New Testament in vain to find comparable timing statements for the church. Eleventh, Israel had a priesthood with all her priests coming from the tribe of Levi and the line of Aaron (Exod. 28:1). By contrast, the church does not have a priesthood because it is a priesthood (Rev. 1:6). The New Testament teaches the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). Every Church Age believer is a priest with direct access to God the Father through God the Son (Heb. 4:16).

Twelfth, while Israel will be resurrected at the beginning of the millennial kingdom (Dan. 12:2; John 11:23-24; Rev. 20:4-5), Church Age believers receive their resurrected bodies at the point of the rapture (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:50-58). Thirteenth, Israel's judgment will take place on earth, at the end of the Tribulation period, in the wilderness (Ezek. 20:33-44). By contrast, the only judgment the New Testament reveals for the church is the Bema Seat judgment of rewards in heaven following the rapture (Rom. 14:10; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10).

Fourteenth, although the gates of the New Jerusalem are named after the twelve tribes (Rev. 21:12), who were the foundation of Israel (Matt. 19:28), the foundations of the eternal city are named after the twelve apostles (Rev. 21:14), who are the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20). Fifteenth, people become members of the commonwealth of Israel through physical birth. By contrast, membership in the church is only attained by spiritual birth (John 3:1-9; Titus 3:5).

Sixteenth, Israel was directly governed by the Mosaic Law (Ps. 147:19-20). By contrast, the controlling authority for the church is New Testament revelation. While all Scripture is *for* the church (2 Tim. 3:16; Rom. 15:4), only the New Testament's epistolary literature is directly *about* the church. Seventeenth, the Holy Spirit indwelt and filled Old Testament Jews selectively (Joel 2:28), temporarily (1 Sam. 16:14; Ps. 51:11), and subsequent to salvation in order to enable them to accomplish a special purpose (Exod. 31:3). By contrast, the Holy Spirit indwells all Church-Age believers (1 Cor. 12:13) permanently (John 14:16) and at the point of salvation (Rom. 8:9). Thus, the Spirit's work in and through Israel cannot be used as a pattern to depict the believer's normative experience with the Holy Spirit in the present age (John 7:37-39; 14:16-17; Acts 1:5). Eighteenth, while Christ's farewell address to Israel (Matt. 24:15, 20) is recorded in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24-25), His farewell address to the church (John 16:12-13) is found in the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17). Nineteenth, although Israel is referred to as God's first-born son (Exod. 4:22), the church is never given this same designation or title. Twentieth, while Israel's program is revealed in the Old Testament, the church's program was unknown in Old Testament times. Because the church is a New Testament mystery (Eph. 3:3-6), or something previously hidden and now unveiled (Rom. 16:25-26), Church Age doctrine comes exclusively from the New Testament (Matt. 16:18; John 13-17) rather than the Old Testament. Noting such differences should caution us against taking prophecies and promises that are

specifically aimed at God's kingdom program through Israel and misapplying them to the present dispensation of the Church Age.

(To Be Continued...)