

THE COMING KINGDOM, PART XVI

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. In this series, the biblical teaching on the kingdom has been surveyed from Genesis to Revelation. 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 leading to the kingdom's postponement.

Due to this postponement, Christ explained the spiritual conditions that would prevail during the kingdom's absence. This interim program includes His revelation of the kingdom mysteries and the church (Matt. 13; 16:18). Because neither the kingdom mysteries nor the church represent the fulfillment of God's Old Testament kingdom promises, the kingdom will remain in a state of abeyance as long as God's present work in the world continues through His interim program. However, one day the church's mission on the earth will be completed resulting in the church's removal from the earth through the rapture. Then God, who is not forgetful of His prior unconditional covenants with Israel, will re-extend the offer of the kingdom to national Israel in the midst of the coming Great Tribulation. Unlike at the First Advent, this time the offer will be accepted leading to Christ's return and subsequent earthly kingdom. Revelation therefore

explains how the world will eventually transition from the rule that Satan has had over the world ever since the Fall in Eden (Luke 4:5-8) to the future time in history when God and His people "will reign upon the earth" (Rev. 5:10b; 11:15b). The Apocalypse also furnishes the important detail of the Messianic kingdom's duration, namely one-thousand years (Rev. 20:1-10). A chronological approach to Revelation reveals that the Millennial kingdom will be followed by the Eternal State. Thus, God's kingdom program will extend beyond Christ's one-thousand year earthly reign as it transitions into the Eternal kingdom (Rev. 21–22).

Far from the incorrect or imprecise "kingdom now" terminology typically employed by many evangelicals today, when the kingdom comes, it will be tangible, literal, physical, geographical, and earthly as well as moral and ethical in tone. We further noted that those closest to the biblical text, the early church fathers, also held to premillennialism or the reality of the coming, earthly kingdom of Christ. In fact, the premillennial view was dominant in the first two centuries of the church. We also observed that the problem with using New Testament verses in an attempt to argue that the Messianic kingdom now exists in spiritual form is to interpret the New Testament in a manner that contradicts the Old Testament.

CONTEMPORARY KINGDOM CONFUSION

Considering that a careful Genesis to Revelation survey very clearly indicates that the kingdom is a future and postponed reality, why do so many evangelicals believe that the Messianic kingdom has already materialized or is within the power of the modern church to set up? Mega-church pastor and bestselling author Rick Warren epitomizes the "kingdom now" vocabulary and mentality that is so prevalent in the modern evangelical church, when he says:

I stand before you confidently right now and say to you that God is going to use you to change the world...I'm looking at a stadium full of people

right now who are telling God they will do *whatever it takes to establish God's Kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven."* What will happen if the followers of Jesus say to Him, "We are yours?" What kind of spiritual awakening will occur? (italics added).¹

Is there a biblical basis for such a "kingdom-now" belief? Interestingly, the same handful of New Testament texts that seemingly teach a present kingdom are routinely and consistently employed in an attempt to argue for "kingdom now" theology. The purpose of this and subsequent articles is to scrutinize these few and isolated texts that "kingdom now" theologians typically use and to demonstrate their insufficiency to prove "kingdom now" theology.

THE KINGDOM IS AT HAND

Early in the gospels, we find the expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" as proclaimed to the nation by John the Baptist (Matt 3:2; Mark 1:15), Christ (Matt 4:17), the Twelve (Matt 10:5-7), and the Seventy (Luke 10:1, 9, 11). The Greek verb *engizo* is translated "near" or "at hand." However, "kingdom now" theologians understand the phrase "at hand" to mean "here" in the sense that the kingdom has already arrived.² However, such an interpretation is controversial and is hardly a foregone conclusion. James 5:8-9 uses the identical verb *engizo* to communicate the nearness or any moment expectation of the Lord's coming. These verses say, "You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door." Here, not only is the verb *engizo* translated "near" used that is also used in the early-Gospel expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," but so is the identical parsing of this same verb. In all of these instances, the verb *engizo* appears as a third person singular perfect active indicative. Virtually no one interprets

¹ Warren cited in Roger Oakland, *Faith Undone*, Kindle Edition.

² Kenneth Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 2nd ed. (Tyler: TX: ICE, 1997), 223.

James 5:8-9 as conveying the Lord's presence or arrival. Rather, all understand the passage as describing His imminent nearness or any-moment appearance. Thus, why should the same verb and parsing in the expression "for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" not be given the same rendering of the kingdom's imminent nearness rather than its presence or arrival? In other words, if the grammatical structure of James 5:8-9 conveys the imminency and nearness of the Lord's coming, then consistency dictates that the same grammatical structure in the expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" also depicts the kingdom's imminent nearness rather than its arrival. Toussaint notes that the perfect tense employed in all of these verses communicates "that the kingdom had drawn near and was then in a condition of nearness."³ William Lane similarly notes, "The linguistic objections to the proposed rendering 'has come' are weighty, and it is better to translate 'has come near.'"⁴

Furthermore, the fact that the word "kingdom" in the expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" is given no detailed explanation in these verses must mean that John, Christ, the Twelve, and the Seventy are drawing upon information already revealed about the kingdom in the Old Testament. Thus, they are offering to Israel what the Old Testament reveals concerning the kingdom.⁵ As explained throughout this series, the Old Testament consistently depicts the kingdom in earthly, terrestrial terms. The Jews of Christ's day, who were well familiar with this Old Testament understanding, were similarly anticipating an earthly, literal kingdom.

The ministry of the incarnate Christ never altered this earthly expectation. Not only did the disciples believe that Christ was going to restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6), but the mother of James and John also requested that her sons be given places of prominence with the

³ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Kregel, 2005), 63.

⁴ William Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 65, n. 93.

⁵ George Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1952), 1:195.

earthly kingdom's establishment (Matt. 20:20-21). Because the request in Matthew 20 and the inquiry of Acts 1 both transpired late in Christ's ministry, it is unlikely that the disciples had a mistaken understanding of the kingdom at this point. They had already heard Jesus teach extensively about the kingdom and had already been blessed by Christ for their insight into the kingdom (Matt. 13:11-17).⁶

Interestingly, in the events surrounding both Matthew 20:20-21 and Acts 1:6, Christ never issued a rebuke due to a faulty understanding or expectation of a future, earthly kingdom. Rather, in Matthew 20, His only correction to the mother of James and John related to her failure to consider that the cross precedes the crown (Matt. 20:22-23). Similarly, in Acts 1, His only correction of the disciples involved their misunderstanding concerning the timing of the establishment of the Davidic kingdom, not the fact of its ultimate fulfillment (Acts 1:7). In neither case did Christ challenge their common expectation that a future, earthly kingdom would ultimately become a reality. All of this background shows that the phrase "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" could hardly represent an inauguration of a spiritual kingdom in Christ's early ministry.

In sum, far from teaching that the kingdom had now arrived in a spiritual sense, the expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" merely communicates that the Old Testament expectation of an earthly kingdom had drawn near in the person of Christ. Had the nation enthroned Christ (Deut. 17:15), what the Old Testament predicted concerning an earthly kingdom would have become a reality not only for Israel but also for the entire world. As long as Christ was present amongst first-century Israel offering them the kingdom, it was in an imminent state of nearness. This reality is an entirely different matter from saying that the kingdom was

⁶ Toussaint, 62.

present or had arrived. Unfortunately, "kingdom now" theologians miss the true import of the early-Gospel expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" by instead arguing that the kingdom is here rather than near. In actuality, in Christ's early ministry, the opposite was true. This conclusion comes from carefully noting the grammar of the passages as well as the common understanding of "kingdom."

(To Be Continued...)