

THE COMING KINGDOM, PART XXI

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. We have noted thus far that what the Old Testament predicts concerning an earthly kingdom was offered to Israel during Christ's First Advent. Yet, the nation rejected this kingdom offer leading to the kingdom's postponement. Therefore, what the Scripture predicts concerning the kingdom will not be fulfilled until the kingdom offer is one day re-extended to and accepted by Israel during the Tribulation. In the interim, the kingdom is future as God now pursues an interim program that includes the church.

In addition, we began scrutinizing a series of texts that "kingdom now" theologians routinely employ in order to argue that the kingdom is a present, spiritual reality. The goal in doing so is to show that none of these passages, when rightly understood, teach a present, spiritual form of the kingdom. We began with the use of such alleged "kingdom now" texts in the life of Christ. Such texts include "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:5-7), "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness" (Matt. 6:33), "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence" (Matt. 11:12), and "the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28). We now begin an extended analysis of Luke 17:20-21, which represents a key proof text utilized by "kingdom now" theologians seeking to scripturally prove a spiritually present manifestation of the kingdom.

THE KINGDOM IS IN YOUR MIDST

Another statement made by Christ conceivably arguing that the kingdom has already come in spiritual form is found in Luke 17:20-21. These verses say, "Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here *it is!*' or, 'There *it is!*' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst.'" Like Matt 12:28, this statement is also interpreted by "kingdom now" theologians to indicate that Christ began a spiritual form of the Messianic kingdom at His First Advent. In fact, passages such as Matthew 12:28 and Luke 17:20-21 are critical to the "kingdom now" theology of the emergent church. Gibbs and Bolger explain: "How did Emerging churches come to emphasize the Gospel of the Kingdom? It began with a shift from the Epistles to the Gospels as a way to understand Jesus more profoundly."¹ Of Luke 17:20-21, E.R. Craven similarly notes, "This passage, probably, by the advocates of the prevalent theory of the Basileia, is regarded as their most important proof-text, both as to its *nature* and *present establishment*."² However, to the "kingdom now" use of these verses, several responses can be given.

First, it is appropriate to dispute the all too common rendering that says, "the kingdom of God is within you." This rendering could not be correct since in context Christ was addressing the Pharisees. How could the kingdom be within the satanically empowered Pharisees (John 8:44)? These were the very individuals plotting to murder Christ at the very time that these words were uttered. Furthermore, the Scripture always portrays people entering the kingdom (Matt. 5:20; 23:13; John 3:5) rather than the kingdom entering them. Besides, does Christ perfectly reign in the hearts of the believer today? If so, why are there consistent commands given in the New Testament epistles against grieving (Eph. 4:30) and quenching the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19)? The mere existence of these prohibitions implies that believers today have the

capacity to commit these sins and consequently inhibit the reigning influence of Christ in their hearts. In addition, this frequent rendering converts the kingdom into a spiritual reality only. However, as has been developed throughout this series, a terrestrial, geo-political element is always included in the Old Testament's presentation of the kingdom. Such an abrupt change from understanding the kingdom as encompassing this physical reality to solely a spiritual reality is tantamount to hermeneutically changing horses in midstream. Why would Christ, or any of the New Testament writers for that matter, introduce such a radical transition without any in-depth commentary explaining that such a transition was underway.

Also, if Luke 17:20-21 evidences the fact that Jesus set up a present, spiritual form of the kingdom during His First Advent, then why is His earthly ministry subsequent to these verses characterized by perpetual promises of a future, earthly kingdom? For example, in Matthew 19:28, Christ promised His disciples, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." In Matthew 26:29, He similarly told His disciples, "But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom." Even Christ's closest companions understood His teaching as conveying a future, earthly kingdom. 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 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. Also, the penitent thief on the cross obviously saw the kingdom as a future reality when he exclaimed, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" (Luke

23:42). Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy disciple of Christ in whose tomb Christ was eventually buried, also understood Christ as teaching a future kingdom. Mark 15:43 says, "Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who *himself was waiting for the kingdom of God*; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus" (italics added).

Second, "kingdom now" theologians rely upon the present tense expression "is in your midst" (Luke 17:21) to argue for a present form of the Messianic kingdom. However, this verse need not teach "kingdom now" theology. To the Jewish mind king and kingdom went together like horse and carriage. It was unfathomable for them to have a king without the presence of the kingdom. Note the following passages that link king and kingdom. Isaiah 9:6-7 says, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this." Daniel 7:13-14 similarly explains, "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." Note also Luke 1:26-27, 32, "In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary...He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of

his father David." E.R. Craven further explains this king and kingdom connection to the Jewish mind:

Now, remembering the close connection in the Jewish mind between the establishment of the Basileia, and the glorious coming of the Son of Man—a connection established by the prophecy of Daniel (7:13, 14), and not previously rebuked but approved by Jesus (Luke 9:26, 27)—let anyone hypothesize as the meaning of...*with the signs of a gradual approach*, and of...*in the midst of*, and read the entire passage, vers. 20–30.³

All of this to say, that the kingdom was very much in the midst of the nation (Luke 17:21) at Christ's First Advent since the king was present.

However, the offer of the kingdom framework, which has been discussed in prior articles,⁴ is sufficient for handling these verses in the same way it is capable of handling Matthew 12:28. Christ's presence manifested kingdom realities that could also have become tangible for the nation had they fulfilled their obligation of enthroning their king (Deut. 17:15). In other words, the presence of the kingdom in Christ could not become a reality for all because of the nation's rejection of the kingdom offer. Grammarian Max Zerwick notes how this interpretation represents an acceptable rendering of the present tense expression "is in your midst":

In view of the fact that Christ was addressing the Pharisees modern exegetes generally prefer to translate "among" but this meaning is elsewhere unknown. Secular and patristic evidence has been adduced (by C.H. Roberts) for an extension of the meaning "within", viz. *in your hands* (ref. that for which one is responsible), *in your power of choice* (cf "it lies with you"), i.e. from the human side the K is yours if you choose it, if you will it.⁵

(To Be Continued...)

¹ Paul Smith, *New Evangelicalism* (Costa Mesa, CA: Calvary, 2011), 119.

² E.R. Craven, "Excursus on the Basileia," in *Revelation of John*, (New York: Scribner, 1874), 96.

³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴ See parts five, six, and nineteen in this series for an explanation of this idea.

⁵ Max Zerwick, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Rome: Pontificio, 1996), 251-52.