

THE COMING KINGDOM, PART XXXII

by Andy Woods

We began scrutinizing New Testament texts that "kingdom now" theologians employ in an attempt to argue that the kingdom is a present reality to show that none of these passages teach a present, spiritual form of the kingdom. We have examined the typical texts from both the Gospels and Acts used by "kingdom now" theologians. In the prior installment, we similarly began examining the Pauline Epistles.

TRANSFERRED INTO THE KINGDOM OF HIS SON

Another New Testament text employed by "kingdom now theologians" is Colossians 1:13, which says, "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son." A parallel passage is found in Acts 26:17-18. Here, the Lord defines Paul's ministry as follows: "...the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me." According to kingdom now theologians, these verses teach that when someone becomes a believer, they are transferred from Satan's kingdom or dominion into the present, spiritual form of the Messianic kingdom. However, it is difficult to argue that this verse teaches an "already" phase of the kingdom since Christ is nowhere called the king of the church.¹ Rather the imagery used of Christ's relationship to the church is that of groom to bride (Eph. 5:22-33) and head to body (Col. 1:18) rather than king to subject. There are at least *two* other more viable alternative interpretations of Colossians 1:13 other than the view espoused by kingdom now theologians.

First, Colossians 1:13 could be speaking of the universal kingdom rather than the Davidic kingdom. Ryrie justifies such a distinction between the universal and Davidic kingdoms on the ground that some verses present the kingdom as in a state of perpetual existence (Ps. 93:1-2) while other verses indicate that the kingdom will be a future reality (Dan. 2:44). Moreover, some verses depict the kingdom as universal in scope (Ps. 103:19) while other verses picture the kingdom as earthly (Dan. 2:35, 44-45). Furthermore, some verses present the kingdom as being directly ruled by God (Dan. 4:17) while other verses depict the kingdom as being indirectly administered by God through a human agent (Ps. 2:6-9). Thus, the universal kingdom is eternal, comprehensive, and under God's direct rule. By contrast, the theocratic, Davidic kingdom is futuristic, earthly, and under God's indirect rule.²

Therefore, it is possible to understand Colossians 1:13 as speaking of the universal kingdom rather than the Davidic kingdom. This view is strengthened upon observing that the kingdom in this verse is juxtaposed against Satan's kingdom. Thus, just as Satan's kingdom, at least to some degree, is universal in the present (1 John 5:19), Christ's kingdom that is here contrasted with Satan's kingdom must be universal as well. Kingdom now theologians are correct to observe that a universal kingdom categorization does not work in the early kingdom preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus where it is said that the kingdom has drawn near (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; Luke 10:9, 11). However, the universal kingdom categorization could work well with a passage like Colossians 1:13 where a drawing near is not indicated. Thus, all that Colossians 1:13 could be communicating is that when someone becomes a Christian, he becomes part of God's universal kingdom as opposed to becoming a subject in the present, spiritual, Davidic kingdom.

Second, it is possible to interpret Colossians 1:13 along the lines of a *de jure* (legal) *de facto* (factual) distinction. While believers are legally heirs of God's kingdom, the kingdom is not yet a factual reality upon the earth. Paul wrote the Book of Colossians at the same time as his other prison letters including Philippians and Ephesians. We find the same *de jure/de facto* distinction in these other letters. For example, in Philippians, believers are called "citizens of heaven" (Phil. 3:20). In Ephesians, believers are said to be "seated with Christ in the heavenly places" (Eph. 2:6). This heavenly position represents the legal standing of the believer. Yet believers are not factually in heaven now. This same *de jure/de facto* distinction may be present in the Colossian letter regarding the kingdom.

This is especially true given the parallels between the Books of Colossians and Ephesians. Paul wrote these letters from the same place, during his first Roman imprisonment from A.D. 60 to 62 (Acts 28:16-31). Ephesians was most likely the first prison letter that Paul wrote, and Colossians was likely his second letter written shortly thereafter. Moreover, the cities of Colossae and Ephesus are a short geographical distance from one another of approximately one hundred miles. In addition, a symbiotic relationship exists between the letters. Colossians features Christ as head and Ephesians features the church as His body. All of this to say that if the *de jure/de facto* distinction exists in Ephesians regarding the believer's heavenly position (Eph. 2:6), then it most likely exists in Colossians as well regarding the believer's kingdom position (Col. 1:13). Thus, all Colossians 1:13 really teaches is that believers are citizens of the earthly kingdom to come rather than subjects in a spiritual, Davidic kingdom allegedly present today.

This latter view is strengthened upon observing that Paul mentions the kingdom right alongside his discussion of the believer's inheritance. The immediately preceding verse,

Colossians 1:12, says, "...who has qualified us to share in the *inheritance* of the saints in Light" (italics added). The notion of an inheritance (*klēros*) conveys the idea of a legal benefit that someone presently owns although they will not enjoy or possess that benefit until some later point in time. Peter conveys this meaning of an inheritance through his use of the nearly identical word *klēronomia*. First Peter 1:4 says, "to *obtain* an inheritance *which is* imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you." In this sense, the kingdom described in Colossians 1:12 is an inheritance. The believer's present status is that of a legal citizen in the kingdom. However, believers will not possess or enjoy this benefit until a future point in time when the kingdom will ultimately be established upon the earth.

This *de jure/de facto* understanding of the kingdom in Colossians 1:13 is further buttressed by examining the immediate context (Col. 1:13-14). Colossians 1:13 says, "For He rescued us from the *domain* of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (italics added). Although believers may have been delivered legally from Satan's authority (1 John 5:18), they have not been delivered in fact and in present experience from Satan's authority. Rather, believers regularly wrestle against Satan's authority. Ephesians 6:12 states, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*." The word translated "powers" here is the Greek word *exousia*, which is the same word translated "domain" in Colossians 1:13.

Similarly, Colossians 1:14 says, "in whom we have *redemption*, the forgiveness of sins" (italics added). Although believers currently possess legal redemption (*apolytrōsis*), they have not yet received redemption in its fullness. Notice the following passages that use this same word "redemption" (*apolytrōsis*) to depict the future reality of the believer. Luke 21:28: "But when

these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your *redemption* is drawing near." Romans 8:23: "...even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the *redemption* of our body." Ephesian 1:13-14: "...the Holy Spirit of promise who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the *redemption* of God's own possession..." Ephesians 4:30: "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of *redemption*."³ Thus, if believers can be said to be positionally and legally liberated from Satan's authority, and redeemed despite the fact that these truths are not present factual realities, then why cannot be the same said for the believer's relationship to the kingdom that is mentioned in the very same context? As is the case with both redemption and freedom from Satanic authority, believers are also legally and positionally citizens of a kingdom that will not be manifested upon the earth until a future time period.

E.R. Craven well summarizes:

Col. 1:13. At first glance, the passage apparently teaches that believers are already translated *de facto* into the Basileia; it may however legitimately be regarded as teaching a *de jure* translation. Not only does this interpretation bring the passage into harmony with the great mass of Scripture, but it seems to be required by the immediately preceding and succeeding contexts; believers are not yet delivered *de facto* from the *exousia* of Satan (Eph. 6:12), nor have they yet received *de facto*, certainly not in completeness, the *apolytrōsis* (comp. Luke 21:28; Rom. 8:23; Eph. 1:14; 4:30...)⁴

Of Colossians 1:13, McClain also observes:

The context here suggests that the action must be regarded as *de jure* [by right] rather than *de facto* [in reality]. Believers have been "delivered . . . from the power of darkness," the apostle declares. Yet in another place he warns that we must still wrestle "against the rulers of the darkness of this world" (Eph. 6:12). Our translation into the Kingdom of Christ, therefore, must be similar to that act of God when He "raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). Although we are not yet *de facto* seated in the heavenlies, the

thing is so certain that God can speak of it as already done. In the same sense, we have been (aorist tense) transferred judicially into the Kingdom of our Lord even before its establishment.⁵

(To Be Continued...)

¹ Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor, 1986), 259.

² *Ibid.*, 397-99.

³ Italics added to the preceding passages.

⁴ E.R. Craven, "Excursus on the Basileia," in *Revelation of John*, ed. J. Lange (New York: Scribner, 1874), 97.

⁵ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 435.