

## THE COMING KINGDOM, PART XXXVIII

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 in order to show that none of these passages teach a present form of the kingdom. We have examined the typical texts from the Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, the general epistles, and Revelation that are typically used by "kingdom now" theologians. At this point, we largely find ourselves in agreement with the following statement by Craven. Concerning a present, spiritual establishment of the kingdom, Craven notes, "There is no critically undisputed passage in the Scriptures which declares, or necessarily implies, even a *partial* establishment in New Testament times."<sup>1</sup> We then began to take a look at some other miscellaneous arguments used by "kingdom now" theologians. In prior installments, we scrutinized how "kingdom now" theologians often appeal to alleged New Testament silence regarding a future earthly reign of Christ.

We then moved on to examining yet another miscellaneous argument commonly emanating from the "kingdom now" camp: namely, that if Christ is not now reigning from David's Throne in heaven, then He is doing nothing at the present time. As we saw in the prior installment, nothing could be further from the truth. Christ presently pursues an active session through His ongoing roles as the Sustainer of the universe as well and the church's head, husband, bestower of spiritual gifts, and builder. His present activity is also evidenced in that He continually intercedes for and advocates on behalf of the believer. However, these activities comprise His "present session"<sup>2</sup> rather than His Davidic reign.

CHRIST'S PRESENT SESSION IS NOT THE KINGDOM

Despite the many activities associated with Christ's current ministry in His present session, these should not be confused with His Davidic rule and future kingdom. As noted in prior installments, the activity of God in and through the Church bears little resemblance to the conditions that the Scripture anticipates regarding His future terrestrial rule.<sup>3</sup> Even the key event that began the Church Age, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the Church on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), fails to precisely harmonize with predictions regarding the Davidic Covenant. Charles Ryrie asks, "If Christ inaugurated His Davidic reign at His ascension, does it not seem incongruous that His first act as reigning Davidic king was the sending of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33), something not included in the promises of the Davidic Covenant?"<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, as noted by Chafer, Christ's present session is not the kingdom:

Over and above all the stupendous present ministry of the resurrected, exalted Savior already noted is the attitude which He is said to maintain toward the day when, coming back to the earth, He will defeat all enemies and take the throne to reign. Important, indeed, is the revelation which discloses the fact that Christ is now in the attitude of expectation toward the oncoming day when, returning on the clouds of heaven, He will vanquish every foe...Hebrews 10:13 records His expectation, which reads: "From henceforth expecting till His enemies be made His footstool."...As High Priest over the true tabernacle on high, the Lord Jesus Christ has entered into heaven itself there to minister as priest in behalf of those who are His own in the world (Heb. 8:1-2)...The fact that He sat down on His Father's throne and not on His own thrown reveals the truth, so constantly and consistently taught in the Scriptures, that He did not set up a kingdom on the earth at His first advent into the world, but that He is now "expecting" until the time when His kingdom shall come in the earth and the divine will shall be done on earth as it is done in heaven. "The kingdoms of this world" are yet to become "the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15), and the kingly Son will yet ask of His Father and He will give Him the nations for His inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for His possession (Ps. 2:8). However, Scripture clearly indicates too that He is not now establishing that kingdom rule in the earth (Matt. 25:31-46), but that rather He is calling out from both the Jews and Gentiles a heavenly people who are related to Him as His Body

and Bride. After the present purpose is accomplished He will return and "build again the tabernacle of David, which is falling down" (Acts 15:13-18). Though He is a King-Priest according to the Melchizedek type (Hebrews 5:10; 7:1-3), He is now serving as Priest and not as King.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the preceding discussion demonstrates that while the present age is not the kingdom, this does not automatically lead to the conclusion that Christ today is doing nothing. Rather, Christ, in His present ministry at the Father's right hand, is quite active. However, such present activities should not be confused with the anticipated kingdom.

#### WHERE WE HAVE BEEN AND WHERE WE ARE GOING

This series has accomplished the following goals that were established at the onset.<sup>6</sup> *First*, the biblical teaching on the kingdom of God has been surveyed from Genesis to Revelation. Such an analysis was necessary in order to allow us to capture God's mind on this important subject. *Second*, this series has set forth some general problems with a New Testament based "kingdom now" interpretation. *Third*, this series has examined the isolated New Testament texts and miscellaneous arguments that "kingdom now" theologians typically use, and it has demonstrated how each is insufficient to convey "kingdom now" theology.

We now move on to the final leg in our journey. Here, we will note why this trend of equating God's present work in the church with the Messianic kingdom is a matter believers should be concerned about, since this theology not only radically alters God's design for the church but is also the seedbed of many major false doctrines that have sadly entered Christ's church.

#### SO WHAT?

Our goal in this section is to demonstrate to the reader that one's view concerning a present or future kingdom has real-world implications in terms of how one works out one's theology in the life of the local church and in the real world. In other words, ideas have consequences. Theological studies can be likened to dominoes in a row. Knocking over just one domino inevitably impacts the other dominoes. Similarly, when one area of theology is altered it has an inevitable impact upon other areas of systematic theology and biblical interpretation. In this final section, a brief examination will be given regarding how "kingdom now" theology has an inevitable impact upon other areas of biblical truth.

### CHANGING THE CHURCH'S PURPOSE

Why does it matter whether Christ's present work through the church is equated with Christ's Messianic kingdom? The answer to this question lies in the fact that "kingdom now" theology alters the divine design for the church. Another way of saying this is one's eschatology (his view of the future kingdom) affects his ecclesiology (doctrine of the church).

Earlier in this series, we noted that the church, which began in Acts 2, exists for *three* specific, divinely-ordained reasons.<sup>7</sup> *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).

However, McClain explains how these basic and divinely-given ecclesiastical purposes rapidly become confused the moment that the church begins to view itself as the kingdom:

Theological confusion, especially in matters which have to do with the church, will inevitably produce consequences which are of grave practical concern. The identification of the Kingdom with the church has led historically to ecclesiastical policies and programs which, even when not positively evil, have been far removed from the original simplicity of the New Testament *ekklēssia*. It is easy to claim that in the “present kingdom of grace” that the rule of the saints is wholly “spiritual,” exerted only through moral principles and influence. But practically, once the church becomes the Kingdom in any realistic theological sense, it is impossible to draw any clear line between principles and their implementation through political and social devices. For the logical implications of a present ecclesiastical *kingdom* are unmistakable, and historically have always led in one direction, i.e., political control of the state by the Church. The distances traveled down this road by various religious movements, and the forms of control which were developed, have been widely different. The difference is very great between the Roman Catholic system and modern Protestant efforts to control the state; also between the ecclesiastical rule of Calvin in Geneva and the fanaticism of Münster and the English “fifth-monarchy.” But the basic assumption is always the same: The church in some sense is the kingdom, and therefore has a divine right to rule; or it is the business of the church to “establish” fully the Kingdom of God among men. Thus the church loses its pilgrim character and the sharp edge of its divinely commissioned “witness” is blunted. It becomes an *ekklēssia* which is not only in the world, but also of the world. It forgets that just as in the regeneration of the soul only God can effect the miracle, even so the “regeneration” of the world can only be wrought by the intrusion of regal power from on high (Matt. 19:28).<sup>8</sup>

McClain's quote notes several problems when the church begins to see itself as the kingdom.

(To Be Continued...)

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<sup>1</sup> E.R. Craven, "Excursus on the Basileia," in *Revelation of John*, ed. J. P. Lange (New York: Scribner, 1874), 95.

<sup>2</sup> L.S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 5:273-79.

<sup>3</sup> See parts 9 and 10.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 169.

<sup>5</sup> Chafer, 5:278-79.

<sup>6</sup> See part 1.

<sup>7</sup> See part 9.

<sup>8</sup> Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 438-39.