

The Church and the Kingdom

John Hepp, Jr.

This study shows that the church is vitally related to the future kingdom of the Lord Jesus. It has four parts with seven subparts. Part A comments on the first clear biblical prediction—and its context—of the church. Part B defines the kingdom. Part C deals with current views that the kingdom has begun. Part D sketches the relationship of the church to the kingdom.

A. The Church Predicted

1. The first clear biblical prediction of the church—Matthew 16:13-19—relates it to the kingdom. That occasion was when Simon, as spokesman for the apostles, made the great confession about Jesus. His confession was a revelation from the Father. The Son, in turn, made a revelation that included His future church (*ekklesia*).

- The revelation from the Father (vv. 16-17) is the confession about Jesus:

You are the Christ (Messiah).

Christ (Greek *cristos*) means **the promised King of the promised kingdom**, the Messiah (Matt. 2:2,4; Luke 23:2). This title was used of all the kings of Israel and, above all, of the future great Son of David, as in Psalm 2:2,6. Like *mashiac*, its Hebrew equivalent, *cristos* literally means “anointed,” referring to God’s gift of the Holy Spirit upon the king.

As seen in all three accounts of Simon’s confession, the key term is “Christ.” Although Matthew adds “Son of God,” Luke and Mark do not. Luke 9:20 has “the Christ [anointed] of God”; Mark 8:29 has “the Christ.” Evidently, “Son of God” in Matthew is not basically different from “Christ” but an extension emphasizing His heirship, as in Solomon’s case (1 Chron. 17:11-14).

- The revelation from the Son (vv. 18-19) began by His blessing the confessor:

You are Peter (man of rock).

He then announced that He would build the church (*ekklesia*—see subpart 7) on this rock (v. 18). And He would give to Peter (as representative of all confessors?) the “**keys of the kingdom of heaven**” and great authority on earth (v. 19).

2. This first prediction of the church was given in the context of Jesus’ message about the kingdom. Starting in Matthew 4:17, Jesus “began to preach” that Israel should repent “because **the kingdom...has come near**” (literal). “Has come near” in Greek is the “perfect tense” (showing the result of a completed action) of *engidzo*, a verb used over forty times in the New Testament. As expected from the cognate adverb *engus* (near), it always meant “come near, approach.” Although a person might come near enough to arrive, the verb itself did not mean “arrive.”

For some examples of *engidzo* see Matthew 21:1; Romans 13:12; James 5:8; 1 Peter 4:7. “Arrive” was expressed by other verbs: such as, *heko* (John 4:47; 8:42; Matt. 24:50; Luke 15:27), *enistemi* (2 Thess. 2:2), even *erkomai* (John 4:25,35).

In fact, John the Baptist had preached the same message (Matt. 3:2). And later Jesus instructed His disciples to continue preaching it (Matt. 10:7). Thus, the constant message, at least in many of the pre-confession chapters (Matt. 3-16), was that the kingdom had come near. From this message we can safely conclude the following:

- This kingdom was **not near before** John the Baptist and Jesus came. Therefore, it was not (a) God’s rule in men’s hearts nor (b) God’s universal kingdom, both of which have always been present. There have always been individuals who surrendered to God. And always from “his throne in heaven...his kingdom rules over all” (Psalm 103:19).
- This kingdom **did not begin** as long as it was described as near, which was true even during Jesus’ final slow journey to Jerusalem (Luke 10:1, 9-11). No Scripture says that it did begin, whereas many Scriptures continue to look at it as future.

B. The Kingdom Defined

3. Though God’s universal kingdom has no “history,” another kingdom in the Bible does have a history. By theologians it has been called the “mediatorial kingdom,” because in it a mediator rules on God’s behalf. Many Scriptures tell about this kingdom.

- It began when God brought Israel out of Egypt and made a covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai (Exod. 19:4-6; 25:22; Psalm 114:1-2). The tabernacle/temple became His earthly house; the golden ark His throne.
- It was suspended when God abandoned the temple—which was destroyed—and Judah went into captivity (Ezek. 10:4,18-19). God raised up many prophets to predict its demise.
- It will be reinstated, also according to many prophecies. For example, Micah 4:1-8 (see second paragraph below) describes it and calls it “the former dominion.” Daniel 2:44-45 pictures it as a stone from heaven that displaces all earthly kingdoms. (Accordingly, the Jews called it “the kingdom of heaven.”)
- In its future form it will fulfill all of God’s purposes and promises in
 - (a) creating the universe and man (Gen. 1:26-27; Psalm 8; Heb. 2:5-9, which says that Psalm 8 is not fulfilled yet)
 - (b) making a covenant with Abram (Gen. 12:1-3)
 - (c) making a covenant with David (2 Sam. 7:12-16)
 - (d) making the new covenant (Jer. 31:33-34)
- Some of its future characteristics will be the following:
 - (a) It will be on earth. (Micah 4:2,4)
 - (b) Jerusalem will be the world capital. (Micah 4:2)
 - (c) The Son of David will rule in righteousness. (Micah 4:3; Isa. 9:6-7)
 - (d) The nation of Israel will be restored and repentant. (Micah 4:6)
 - (e) All nations will live in peace and prosperity. (Micah 4:3)
 - (f) The dead will be raised. (Isa. 25:6-9)
 - (g) There will be no more curse nor sickness. (Isa. 35:5-6)
- Jesus’ **miracles** were proof that this kingdom had come near. Using the same Greek word, Hebrews 6:5 calls them “**miracles** of the age to come.” When even John the Baptist, in prison, began to doubt that Jesus was the coming King, what was Jesus’ response? To perform more of these same miracles for John’s messengers (Matt. 11:2-5; cf. Isaiah 35:5-6).

4. Even though Jesus gave abundant evidence that He was the Messiah, His people Israel rejected Him. The kingdom, though still near, did not begin. Instead, Jesus promised to come again and bring it. This became the hope of Christians. For over two centuries they looked for Jesus' "appearing and His kingdom" (2 Tim. 4:1). They did not identify the church or anything else as the kingdom. Consider their hope as pictured by a second century "Church Father":

But I and whatsoever Christians are orthodox in all things do know that there will be a resurrection of the flesh, and a thousand years in the city of Jerusalem, built, adorned and enlarged, according as Ezekiel, Isaiah, and other prophets have promised. For Isaiah saith of this thousand years... "Behold I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind"... Whereof also our Lord spake when He said, that therein they shall neither marry, nor be given in marriage, but shall be equal with the angels, being made the sons of the resurrection of God. (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, section 2)

C. The Kingdom Not Begun

5. This early confidence in a future kingdom on earth has dimmed. The change came quickly when Christianity (in the 4th century) became the official religion of the Roman empire. Nowadays many Christians believe that the promised kingdom began at Jesus' first coming. What biblical evidence do they have for their belief? Is there evidence that they are wrong?

- Some misdefine the kingdom because they take only a few Scriptures into account. They do not realize, as implied in the title of Alva McClain's superb book, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*. The kingdom will have many aspects, political and material as well as spiritual. Romans 14:17, for example, stresses its essential spirituality ("the kingdom...is not a matter of eating and drinking"). By considering only that verse, some think the kingdom is a present spiritual reality. But why should we think that Romans 14:17 negates Matthew 8:11 ("the feast...in the kingdom") and Isaiah 25:6 ("the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast")? Although "eating and drinking" is not the essence of the kingdom—it will be a part.
- Some misunderstand the verses in which the Lord spoke of the kingdom in the present tense. For example, He twice said in the Sermon on the Mount, "theirs is the kingdom" (Matt. 5:3,10). But remember that Jesus' constant message then—both before the sermon and after it (4:17 and 10:7)—was that the kingdom had drawn near. Even in the Sermon, He several times referred to the kingdom as clearly future (5:19-20; 6:10; 7:21-23). And between those two present-tense verses are six promises of future blessing in that same kingdom (5:4-9). Why, then, did He occasionally refer to the kingdom in the present tense? Because it is common to speak thus of great and well-known future events or conditions. Prophets often spoke of the future as though it were present (Isa. 24:1,3; 40:2). Notice that in Luke 20:33-36 the Lord repeatedly spoke of the future resurrection in the present tense.
- Some emphasize such statements as "the kingdom...has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28) and "the kingdom...is within [in the midst of] you" (Luke 17:21). These probably both mean that the kingdom was present **in the person of the King**. In the contexts of both of these verses (for example, Luke 10:9-11; 19:11-27), the kingdom was repeatedly called near or future.

6. Probably the most common view among evangelicals is that the kingdom is **both present and future**. Although it will finally come as predicted, they say, it began in an unexpected form. For

Scriptural proof, many point to the Lord's "secrets" ("mysteries," KJV) of the kingdom (Matt. 13:11). Many of those parables begin by saying "The kingdom...is like," followed by a description that includes the present. To interpret such parables, consider the following:

- "The kingdom...is like" is a common Jewish introduction for a parable. It does not mean that the next item mentioned is the kingdom. For example, it is clearly not "a man who sowed good seed" (Matt. 13:24), nor "yeast" (Matt. 13:33), nor "a landowner" (20:1). Instead, that introduction means that the whole parable tells something about the kingdom, though the kingdom may be only one part of it. Each interpreter finds the kingdom pictured in the part that fits his own definition. For example, in the Parable of the Tares (Weeds) some identify the kingdom with the field of mixed wheat and tares, which the Lord calls "the world" (Matt. 13:38). But others find it in the consummation that begins with the judgment at the end of the age (vv. 40-41). Some find the kingdom in the tiny mustard seed when first sowed (v. 31); others, after it becomes a tree (v. 32). Since the Lord's disciples defined the kingdom like other Jews, they must have seen it in the grand consummation of each parable.
- What the "secrets of the kingdom" reveal is not a new form of the kingdom but a new age in preparation for it. No prophet, including John the Baptist, had realized that the Messiah would come twice (1 Peter 1:1-12)..
- If the Lord had introduced a new—and quite different—form of the kingdom, He and the apostles would somewhere have distinguished the two forms. Never did they do that; instead, they continued to speak of the kingdom as future. For example,

(a) Matthew 25:31,34,46	(c) Luke 22:16-18	(e) 2 Timothy 4:18
(b) Luke 19:11,15,27	(d) 1 Corinthians 6:9-10	(f) Revelation 5:10

D. The Church Related to the Kingdom

7. What is the relation of the church to Messiah's coming kingdom? It is His kingdom people, His *ekklesia* being formed. (It is already His "kingdom" in this sense, Rev. 1:6; Col. 1:13.)

- *Ekklesia* was not a new concept in Matthew 16. It was the usual Greek term for the Hebrew *qahal*, the "assembly" or "congregation" of God's people Israel in the "former dominion."

In its first uses (Deut. 4:10; 9:10; 18:16, etc.) *ekklesia* refers to Israel assembled by Moses (Exod. 19:17) before God at Mt. Sinai. Stephen refers to the same assembly by the same term (Acts 7:38). In other passages (Deut. 23:1-3; 31:30; 2 Chron. 7:8; 20:5,14; etc.), it refers to the same nation assembled as God's kingdom people on other occasions.

A few verses also referred to an *ekklesia* in the future. For example, Psalm 22:22 looked forward to Messiah's future "congregation," as proved by Hebrews 2:12. (See also Psalm 35:18; 40:9.) The apostles hearing Jesus refer to His *ekklesia* probably thought of that same future congregation. He would prepare His kingdom people.

- For the church (*ekklesia*), then, the kingdom is

(a) our goal (Acts 14:22; 1 Thess. 2:12; 2 Thess. 1:5; Rom. 8:18-25)
(b) our inheritance (Matt. 25:34; 1 Cor. 6:10; James 2:5)
(c) our message (Acts 20:25)
(d) our prayer (Matt. 6:10)