

Is the Kingdom of God Here, Now?

Jesus Christ came proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God. He said, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” He also said, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Are the church and the Kingdom the same thing? Was the Kingdom of God inaugurated on the first Pentecost following the resurrection of Christ? Has Christ’s Kingdom continued to expand until the present? Or is the Kingdom yet to be established?

What comes to your mind when you hear the phrase “Kingdom of God”?

Many, upon hearing the phrase, have mental images of traditional depictions of heaven. They think of clouds, winged babies, a bright light emanating from a throne, robed individuals strumming on harps, and the face of Jesus. To them, the Kingdom of God is heaven itself, which is thought to be the eternal home of the righteous.

For most, “Kingdom of God” remains a poorly defined, ethereal, “something” that is set up in the hearts of men. They are completely satisfied with such sentiments as “Where love is, the Kingdom is,” and think of the Kingdom as some internal “spark of goodness” that will grow ever more brightly until it illuminates the universe.

Books and articles written by evangelicals commonly present the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan as two ever-present, but opposing, realities. The former is the ever-expanding church, which is made up of all who profess Jesus as Lord; the latter is the world, which is under the sway of the devil.

Dispensationalists such as Hal Lindsey, Dwight Pentecost, John Walvoord, Dave Hunt, and a host of others distinguish between the New Testament church and the Kingdom spoken of by the Old Testament prophets. The church, they say, is the “*spiritual* Kingdom,” while the Kingdom prophesied by the Old Testament prophets is the *earthly* Kingdom of Israel, which will be fully restored at the Second Coming of Christ.

Many dispensationalists claim that the Kingdom of Jesus proclaimed was the earthly Kingdom—the Kingdom foreseen by the prophets. They claim, however, that since the Jews—the rightful heirs of the earthly Kingdom—rejected their King, the establishment of the Kingdom has been postponed until the Second Coming. The church is said to be “the Kingdom of His [God’s] dear Son” (Colossians 1:13), which is distinct from the Kingdom proclaimed by Christ and the prophets.

Covenantalists, on the other hand, hold that the church has *replaced* Israel, and that all the Old Testament prophecies about the Kingdom are fulfilled in the establishment and expansion of the church. The Kingdom is here, *now*, they claim—and it is the church, the “new Israel.”

Many covenantalists, particularly those involved in the “Dominionist/Christian Reconstruction” and “Kingdom Now” movements, believe that the role of the church is to “Christianize” the nations through both evangelism and Christian activism. They believe Christians should vigorously work toward the incorporation of Christian and biblical principles and values into all levels of government, economics, education and so forth. One spokesman for the Christian Reconstruction movement even stated his belief that no one should serve in public office unless he believes in the “Christian” doctrine of

the trinity! The Reconstructionist view is founded upon the belief that Jesus Christ, as Sovereign King, is *now* on His throne, that Christians are presently ruling with Him, gradually taking dominion over the affairs of this world—that the Kingdom of God is here, *now*!

But is this true? Has the Kingdom of God already been established? Is the church the Kingdom? Which, if any, of the conflicting views described above is true?

Laying the Foundation

Many New Testament texts speak of the Kingdom as a future reality, while only a few seem to suggest that the Kingdom was established in the time of the apostles and is present on this earth today. Before examining these texts, let's first lay the foundation for understanding by examining the Old Testament background. Remember, the Old Testament revelation is *essential* to a correct understanding of New Testament teachings.

Remember also that the prophecies of the Old Testament must be taken *literally*. Many Bible students spiritualize Old Testament prophecies by reading their interpretations of the New Testament into them. For instance, God's promise to restore the House of Israel and the House of Judah as one nation, establish His covenant with them, and set them above all nations is said to pertain to the establishment and expansion of the New Testament church. Prophecies concerning the future greatness of Jerusalem, inheritance of the land of promise, and the re-gathering of the children of Israel into the land are spiritualized and transferred to the church of this and preceding centuries.

However, as Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., rightly notes: "To treat the older testament merely as a vessel that has little or no content until the interpreter imports Christian meaning from NT texts is demeaning to both the older revelation of God and to those who first heard what they thought was the abiding word of God" (*The Uses of the Old Testament in the New*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1985, p. 145).

Supposing for a moment that the spiritualized interpretations of Old Testament prophecies are correct, think of how disappointed the prophets would have been had they learned that God's promises to heal the breach between Israel and Judah, re-establish them in their land, and bless them abundantly were not to be taken literally. Kaiser is right: To strip Old Testament texts of their literal meaning and import spiritualized "Christian" meaning *is* demeaning—both to those who first believed God's promises and to the inspired text itself!

Of course, the prophecies regarding Israel *do* find a certain fulfillment in the establishment of the New Testament church, but this by no means gives the interpreter license to strip away the literal meaning of those prophecies, or to understand them in a way in which the prophets would have never understood them. (For more on how prophecies on the restoration of Israel apply to the church, write for our booklet, *Daniel's "Seventy Weeks" Prophecy*.)

Let's begin then, with the foundation upon which New Testament teachings about the Kingdom must be understood.

Promises Given to Abraham

The first several chapters of the book of Genesis tell of the Creation, of man's separation from God, of God's displeasure with man's sinfulness, of the Flood of Noah's

time, and of the repopulation of the earth following the Flood. All these events are condensed into eleven short chapters.

Chapter 12 begins the story of Abram, later to be named Abraham. The story of Abraham and his family takes up the remainder of the Old Testament. To gain a good understanding of the New Testament message of the Kingdom of God, we must begin with the promises God gave to Abraham.

“Now the Lord said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: And in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3).

In the succeeding chapters, the same promises are reiterated over and over again, first to Abraham, then to his son Isaac, and then to Isaac’s son Jacob. God promised that He would give the land of Canaan to Abraham and his seed, that He would multiply Abraham’s seed exceedingly, that they would possess the land of Canaan, that they would become a great nation, and that through them all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

From the very beginning, God’s purpose for the nation that would come from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was revealed. God had said to Abraham, “I will make of thee a great nation...and in thee [*i.e.*, the nation to come from Abraham] shall *all families of the earth be blessed.*”

Notice that the promise of blessing was not restricted to Israel (the nation descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), but was to extend to *all families of the earth!* Herein is God’s ultimate purpose for Israel.

From the beginning, God intended to establish Israel as a model nation for all the nations of the earth. Through her example of obedience to God’s Law, and because of the peace and prosperity her citizens would experience as a result of her obedience, she would sit as a brightly-glowing beacon atop a hill, an *example* to the nations of the world. In time, the nations would realize the futility of their ways, and would turn to Israel to learn of her God and seek His ways. Thus, through Abraham’s descendants, all families of the earth would be blessed.

Eventually, Israel *did* inherit the land of promise; she *did* become a great nation. But she did *not* become the model nation she could have become had she been faithful to God and obedient to His Law. Rather than become a glowing example that would attract the nations and cause them to follow her, Israel followed *them* in their idolatrous and abominable practices!

Throughout her tragic history, from the Exodus onward, the majority of the children of Israel proved themselves to be a stiff-necked people. Eventually the nation split into two nations—the northern House of Israel and the southern House of Judah. And, in time, both were conquered by their enemies and taken into exile—just as God’s prophets had predicted!

Even after the Jews (the people of Judah) returned from the Babylonian Exile and resettled the land, they were never truly free from the dominion of other kingdoms. By the time of Christ, many of them were longing for the coming of the Davidic King, the prophesied Messiah, who would free them from Roman dominion, regather the scattered descendants of Jacob, and restore Israel’s sovereignty and national greatness.

With this background information in mind, let's now notice what Scripture reveals about David's dynasty.

The Davidic Kingdom

For a long period after the people of Israel moved into the Promised Land, they were ruled by judges, who functioned not as kings but as military leaders who delivered the Hebrews from their oppressors.

The period of the judges ended during the days of the prophet Samuel. When Samuel's sons proved themselves unworthy to carry on their father's work, the elders of Israel went to Samuel and asked that he appoint a king over them (1 Samuel 8:1-5).

Saul was Israel's first king; but, in time, God rejected him as king over Israel, and appointed David instead. David was of the tribe of Judah, and his dynasty was foretold by Jacob as he lay dying. Notice:

"The scepter [the ruler's staff, a symbol of the ruler's authority] shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver ["the ruler's staff"—NASB] from between his feet, until Shiloh come [or, "until he comes whose right it is"]; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be" (Genesis 49:10).

Notice God's promises concerning the Davidic Dynasty:

"There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Seth....Out of Jacob shall come he that shall have dominion, and shall destroy him that remaineth of the city" (Numbers 24:17,19).

"And as since the time that I commanded judges to be over my people Israel, and have caused thee [David] to rest from all thine enemies. Also the Lord telleth thee that He will make thee an house [a *dynasty*]. And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men: But my mercy shall not depart away from his, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee. *And thine house [dynasty] and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever*" (2 Samuel 7:11-16).

The above promise does not mean that the Davidic Dynasty would always be fully operative throughout history. There did come a time when they dynasty appeared to have collapsed, but the apparent ruin of David's throne did not nullify God's promise. A temporary lack of a Davidic ruler exercising authority over Israel cannot be equated with the termination of the Davidic Dynasty or of God's promise to establish David's throne and kingdom forever.

Now, with this in mind, let's notice several scriptures concerning a certain "Anointed One" prophesied to restore the sovereignty of Israel, take His rightful place on the Throne of David, and usher in the everlasting Kingdom promised to David.

The Davidic King

Jeremiah began to prophesy during the reign of Josiah (Jeremiah 1:2), the last righteous king to reign over Judah. The prophet mourned the death of Josiah (2

Chronicles 35:25), and foretold the seventy years' Babylonian captivity of the House of Judah (Jeremiah 25:8-12). The northern House of Israel had long since been carried into exile by the Assyrians.

The prophet cried mightily against the sins of Judah, warning them of impending disaster. Yet, throughout his prophecy he assured the people that God had not forgotten His promises, and that He would revive and restore them as a great nation, make a new covenant with them, forgive their iniquities, and write His Law in their hearts (Jeremiah 30-33). He prophesied of a time when the everlasting dynasty and kingdom promised to David would reach the height of its glory.

Through Jeremiah, God said: "Behold, the days come...that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In His days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is His name whereby He shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. Therefore behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that they shall no more say, The LORD liveth, which brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt. But, The LORD liveth, which brought up and which led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country, and from all the countries whither I had driven them; and they shall dwell in their own land" (Jeremiah 23:5-8).

Notice that *both* Israel and Judah, as a single nation, will dwell safely *in their own land*. Their reconstitution as a single, prosperous nation is connected with the rule of a "righteous Branch," the Davidic King.

Some claim that this prophecy finds fulfillment in the establishment and expansion of the New Testament church. According to this view, Christ (the "righteous Branch") inaugurated the Kingdom upon the establishment of the church. From that time until the present, He has been reigning upon His Throne in heaven, and executing judgment and justice in the earth. The "new Israel" (the New Testament church) has been reigning with Him, gradually taking dominion through the spread of Christianity. Their "own land" is the entire earth, and their influence and evangelistic efforts are the means through which the King exercises judgment and justice in the earth.

Such a spiritualized interpretation of God's promises is demeaning both to the text and to those who first trusted God to fulfill His word. Those who spiritualize away the plain meaning of the text and import "spiritual" meanings contradict themselves. For instance, they admit that Christ, the Davidic King, had to literally be a descendent of David, had to literally be of the tribe of Judah, and had to literally be born in Bethlehem, just as the prophets had foretold. Yet, prophecies about the future glory of Jerusalem, the reconstitution of Israel and Judah into a single, prosperous nation under the reign of the Davidic King, and the establishment of Israel as a model nation for all the nations of the earth are spiritualized and transferred to the church. This is a clear contradiction, and simply will not stand as a sound way of interpreting the inspired Word of God!

So when God says that Israel *and* Judah will dwell *safely* in their own land—which has yet to happen!—we should take it *literally*! A spiritualized interpretation simply will not suffice!

Now, with this in mind, let's link together several other scriptures pertaining to the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David.

Through Isaiah, God said: "Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, He shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. As many were astonished at thee; His visage was so

marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men: So shall He sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at Him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider” (Isaiah 52:13-15).

This prophecy is set in the context of God’s promise to *redeem* Jerusalem and *restore* Zion (verses 1-12). The “servant,” then, is the Davidic King whose coming was prophesied by Jeremiah and other prophets. Listen to a few of the prophecies about Him:

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The might God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end, upon the *Throne of David*, and upon *His Kingdom*, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this” (Isaiah 9:6,7).

“And in mercy shall the throne be established [prepared]: and He shall sit upon it in truth in the Tabernacle of David, judging, and seeking judgment, and hastening righteousness” (Isaiah 16:5).

“In those days, and at that time, will I cause the Branch of righteousness to grow up unto David: and He shall execute judgment and righteousness in the land. In those days shall Judah be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell safely: and this is the name wherewith she shall be called, The Lord our righteousness” (Jeremiah 33:15,16).

All these prophecies were given during a time when the Davidic Dynasty appeared to have reached its end. They gave hope to the faithful remnant who obeyed God—hope that the Kingdom would be re-established, and that the Davidic Throne would be fully restored and given to its rightful Heir.

This was the Kingdom foreseen by the prophets, a Kingdom that would usher in an age of peace and prosperity for Israel, a Kingdom that would prove to be a guiding light to the nations of the world, thus fulfilling God’s promise to Abraham—that in his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed.

The idea of some ethereal “something” established in the hearts of men, or of some internal “spark of goodness” that would one day glow ever more brightly until it illuminates the universe, was completely foreign to the minds of the prophets. The Kingdom they foresaw is a *real* Kingdom! It involves a King, government, laws, land, and subjects.

Notice Isaiah’s description of the establishment and expansion of the Kingdom:

“And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:2,3).

Isaiah further prophesied: “And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, shall *all flesh* come to worship before me, saith the LORD” (Isaiah 66:23,24).

Zechariah was prophesying of the same Kingdom when he wrote: “And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall

even go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles” (Zechariah 14:16).

While portions of these prophecies may have found typological fulfillments in ancient events, and while the establishment of the New Testament church followed the *patterns* set forth in these prophecies, none of them have been finally fulfilled. The peoples of Israel and Judah have *yet* to be reconstituted into one nation; Jerusalem has *yet* to become the magnificent city foreseen by the prophets; Israel has *yet* to become the model nation she was intended to be; and the Davidic King has *yet* to exercise judgment and justice from His Throne in Jerusalem. *Only* when these things come to pass may we rightly say that the Kingdom has come!

The prophet Daniel foresaw the establishment of the same Kingdom the other prophets spoke of. Let’s now turn our attention to Daniel’s prophecy.

The Everlasting Kingdom

When Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, had a prophetic dream and sought to find out what it meant, only the Hebrew prophet Daniel was able to describe the dream and reveal its interpretation to the king.

Daniel said: “Thou, O king sawest, and behold a great image. This great image, whose brightness was excellent, stood before thee; and the form thereof was terrible. This image’s head was of fine gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs [sides] of brass, His legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay. Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them in pieces. Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away that no place was found for them: and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth” (Daniel 2:31-35).

Daniel then revealed the interpretation of the dream to the king (verses 37-45). The head of gold represents Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom; the breast and arms of silver represent the Medo-Persian Empire, which succeeded Babylon; the belly and sides of brass represent the Greco-Macedonian Empire, which succeeded the Medo-Persian Empire; and the legs of iron and feet of iron and clay represent the Roman Empire, which succeeded the Greco-Macedonian Empire. The legs of iron, the longest segment of the image, represent the Eastern and Western divisions of the Roman Empire and the empire’s long history through several successive stages of existence. The feet of iron and clay represent the final stage of the Roman Empire, which is yet future.

Notice how the latter kingdom will be overthrown:

“And in the days of these kings [of the final stage of the Roman Empire, represented by the feet of iron mingled with clay] shall the God of heaven set up a Kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the Kingdom shall not be let to other people [as the preceding kingdoms were], but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever. Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it brake in pieces the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, and the gold; the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure” (Daniel 2:44,45).

Notice that the “stone cut out without hands” will “break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms.” This is not a description of the gradual “Christianization” of the world; it is a description of a *violent overthrow!* To read anything else into the prophecy is to do violence to the text.

Later, Daniel saw a vision of four strange beasts (Daniel 7:1-8). The four beasts represent the same four empires depicted in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream-image.

Notice what the prophet says about the destruction of these four kingdoms and the establishment of an everlasting Kingdom:

“I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the *Son of man* came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought Him near before Him. And there was given Him dominion, and glory, and a Kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve Him: His dominion, which shall not pass away, and His Kingdom that which shall not be destroyed” (verses 13,14).

Daniel then received the interpretation of this vision:

“These great beasts, which are four, are four kings, which shall arise out of the earth. But the saints of the most High shall take the Kingdom, and possess the Kingdom for ever, even for ever and ever” (verses 17,18).

Daniel learned that the “little horn” that came up among the ten horns of the fourth beast would “speak great words against the most High,” but his dominion would be taken away and he would be destroyed (verses 25,26).

“And the Kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the Kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High, whose Kingdom is an everlasting Kingdom, and all dominions [rulers] shall serve and obey Him” (verse 27).

That was the Kingdom foreseen by the prophets!

The rabbis of Jesus’ time had no difficulty in linking Daniel’s description of the “Son of man” with the many promises concerning the Davidic King who would restore the Kingdom unto Israel. In fact, they understood the title of “Son of man” as a Messianic title, or title belonging to the Anointed One (meaning “Messiah,” or “Christ”).

When Jesus came, many recognized Him as the Messiah, for He had all the “marks” of the Messiah. He was born in Bethlehem; He was of the tribe of Judah; He was a descendent of David; He came during the reign of the fourth beast of Daniel’s prophecy; His ministry began at the end of the sixty-ninth “week” of Daniel’s seventy weeks prophecy (Daniel 9:24-27); and He confirmed His identity through the many miracles He performed.

But the Jews of Jesus’ time did not understand that the Messiah would have to suffer and die. They apparently thought Isaiah’s description of His death (Isaiah 53) was a metaphorical description of the hardships He would face in establishing the Kingdom; or, perhaps, they thought that Isaiah prophesied of *two* Messiahs. One would suffer and die; the other would lead a successful revolt against the Romans and restore the Kingdom unto Israel. In any case, they did not understand that Isaiah’s prophecy describes the death and resurrection of the *one* Messiah. Nor did they understand that His work would be accomplished through *two comings*—one as the sacrificial Lamb of God, the other as conquering King.

However, they *did* understand that the Kingdom would be restored to Israel, that the Davidic King would take His place on the Throne of David, and that through Israel all families of the earth would be blessed.

This knowledge is absolutely essential—it is *foundational*—to a correct understanding of what the New Testament says about the Kingdom of God.

With this foundation, then, let's now turn our attention to the New Testament.

The Future Kingdom

Jesus Christ, the prophesied Son of David, preached the gospel (meaning “good news”) of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 1:23; Mark 1:14; Luke 4:43). John the Baptist, preceding and preparing the way for the Messiah, preached the Kingdom of God (Matthew 3:2).

After His resurrection, before He was taken into heaven, Jesus taught His apostles “things pertaining to the Kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3), and commissioned them to “preach the gospel [the same gospel He preached—the gospel of the Kingdom of God] to every creature” (Mark 16:15). The apostles “went forth, and preached everywhere” (verse 20).

Philip preached, “the things concerning the Kingdom of God” to the Samaritans (Acts 8:12). Paul preached “the things concerning the Kingdom of God” everywhere he went (Acts 19:8; 20:25; 28:23,31).

Just what did “Kingdom of God” mean to the apostles and disciples who preached it? Were they thinking of the establishment and expansion of the church? Did they adopt a spiritualized interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies about the Kingdom?

Before Christ was taken into heaven, His disciples asked Him, “Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the Kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). They clearly envisioned the Kingdom foreseen by the prophets. Until Christ's death, they, like many other Jews, thought that the Messiah would restore the Kingdom to Israel at that time. They were disappointed when they realized that they were mistaken. But now, with the risen Lord in their presence, they wanted to know whether He would *now* inaugurate the Kingdom.

In His reply, Jesus did not say, “You don't understand; the Kingdom is within your hearts.” Rather, He said, “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in His own power” (verse 7). He did not deny that He *would* “restore again the Kingdom to Israel”; He simply said that it was not for His disciples to know *when* this event would take place.

When the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost, Peter said, “But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:16). He then quoted Joel's prophecy (verses 17-21; cf. Joel 2:28). Since Joel's prophecy pertains to the restoration of Israel, may assume that Peter was saying that the Kingdom foreseen by the prophets was being inaugurated then and there. But this is not correct! Peter knew that the prophetic *pattern* set forth in Joel's prophecy found a certain fulfillment in the Pentecost event, but he also knew that the Kingdom foreseen by the prophets had not yet come. Notice what he said to the people in the Temple:

“But those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all His prophets, that Christ should suffer, He hath so fulfilled. Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord. *And He shall send Jesus Christ*, which before was preached unto you: Whom the heaven must receive *until the times of restitution of all things*, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began” (Acts 3:18-21).

Here, the return of Christ is clearly associated with the prophesied “times of restitution of all things.” Peter said that Christ would remain in heaven *until* that time—the time foreseen by all the prophets. He was speaking of the time of the restoration of Israel and establishment of the Kingdom through the intervention of the prophesied Davidic King—Jesus Christ.

Clearly, Peter knew that the Kingdom foreseen by the prophets had *yet* to be established in the earth. It had not yet come, and would not come until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

While a few scriptures *seem* to speak of the Kingdom of God as if it were present (we will examine those scriptures later), many passages clearly present the Kingdom as a *future* reality.

Jesus spoke of the Kingdom as a future reality. He said to His apostles: “Verily I say unto you, that ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on the Throne of His glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28).

The “regeneration” does not refer to the regeneration of the Holy Spirit, as some suppose, but to the future “restitution of all things” foreseen by the prophets (Acts 3:21). Recall that “the saints of the most High shall take the Kingdom, and possess the Kingdom for ever, even for ever and ever” (Daniel 7:18).

Jesus said that “Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets” will be “in the Kingdom of God,” and that “they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the Kingdom of God” (Luke 13:28,29). Compare this with Hebrews 11:9-13:

“By faith he [Abraham] sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.... These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them *afar off*, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.”

These scriptures agree perfectly with the promises given to the patriarchs, and with the many prophecies about the Davidic King and His everlasting Kingdom. Clearly, the Kingdom is *future*.

Paul said that “we [Christians] must through much tribulation enter into the Kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). This can only mean that Christians have *not yet* entered the Kingdom.

To the Thessalonians, Paul wrote: “So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure: Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the Kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer” (II Thessalonians 1:4,5). In the same context, Paul spoke of the time “when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels” (verse 7), and “come to be glorified in His saints” (verse 10). Obviously, the Kingdom for which the Thessalonians suffered had yet to come.

Paul spoke of the Kingdom of God as something to be *inherited*. He said, “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the Kingdom of God” (I Corinthians 6:9). He was pointing out that the righteous *shall*—in the future—inherit the Kingdom.

Addressing the question of what kind of bodies the saints will have in the future resurrection, Paul said that “flesh and blood [mortal human beings] cannot inherit the Kingdom of God” (I Corinthians 15:50). Paul could not have said this had he believed that the saints had already inherited the Kingdom.

Admonishing the Galatians to refrain from the works of the flesh, Paul reminded them that the wicked “shall not inherit the Kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:21; cf. Ephesians 5:5). Again, only the righteous—those whose lives produce the “fruit of the Spirit”—*shall*, in the future, inherit the Kingdom.

Truly converted Christians are *heirs* of the Kingdom, but have yet to *inherit it*. James said: “Hath not God chosen the poor of the world rich in faith, and *heirs of the Kingdom* which He hath promised to them that love Him?” (James 2:5). Notice that those who are “rich in faith” are “*heirs of the Kingdom*,” and that God has promised to give them a Kingdom. James hardly believed that the Kingdom had already been inaugurated, or that the saints had already received it.

Jesus said: “When the Son of man shall come in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then shall He sit upon the Throne of His glory; And before Him shall be gathered all nations: and He shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on His right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, *inherit the Kingdom* prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:31-34).

Jesus’ prophecy matches Daniel’s “Son of man” prophecy perfectly. Both were speaking of a *real* Kingdom that will be set up here on this earth!

The writer of the book of Hebrews said: “For again, when He [God] bringeth in the Firstbegotten into the world, He saith, And let all the angels of God worship Him. And of the angels He saith, Who maketh His angels spirits and His ministers a flame of fire. But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of thy Kingdom” (Hebrews 1:6-8).

At first glance, one might think that this passage pertains only to events associated with the First Coming of Christ. But the writer goes on to say, “But unto the angels hath He not put in subjection *the world to come, whereof we speak*” (Hebrews 2:5). The writer of Hebrews knew that the Davidic King had yet to establish His Kingdom upon this earth.

Without the prophetic foundation provided by the Old Testament, it is easy to misinterpret New Testament teachings about the Kingdom. Among the teachings most often misinterpreted are the Kingdom parables of Christ. Let’s now turn our attention to His parables.

Parables of the Kingdom

Jesus Christ used many parables to describe the Kingdom of God. He likened the Kingdom to a man who sowed good seed, to a grain of mustard seed, to leaven, to a merchant seeking goodly pearls, to a fishnet, to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants, to a house-holder who went out to hire laborers to work his vineyard, to a king who made a marriage feast for his son, to ten virgins, and to a man traveling into a far country who called his servants and delivered to them his goods.

Since several of the Kingdom parables pertain to conditions preceding and leading up to the Second Coming, some claim that the establishment of the Kingdom precedes the

coming of Christ. However, we should realize that the Kingdom parables describe not only the Kingdom itself, but those things that are preparatory to its establishment as well. Christ's ministry, death, and resurrection, as well as the establishment of the church and the evangelistic work of Christ's disciples—all portrayed one way or another in the parables—are essential to the eventual establishment of the Kingdom.

Notice, for example, the parable of the net:

“Again, the Kingdom of Heaven [Matthew often used the expression “Kingdom of Heaven,” Which is the same as the Kingdom of God] is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: Which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away. So shall it be at the end of the world [*aeon*, or “age”]: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:47-50).

While the gathering of fish refers to the making of disciples in this age, the parable does not mean that the Kingdom has already been established. Rather; it means that the making of disciples is necessary to the *future* establishment of the Kingdom. The net represents the *message* of the Kingdom and the *power* of its King. The inauguration of the Kingdom is depicted in the drawing of the net to shore and in the separation of the good fish from the bad.

Another parable that is often cited as “proof” that the Kingdom of God is a present reality is found in Matthew 13:33:

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto leaven which a woman took, and his [mixed] in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.”

Many believe this parable refers to the growth of the church over many centuries, but in view of the prophecies we examined earlier, it is possible that it refers to the expansion of the Kingdom *after* the return of Christ. The prophets declared that when the “mountain of the Lord's house” is established “in the top of the mountains,” the nations will “flow unto it.” In time, “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord” (Isaiah 1:2,3; 11:1-10). Nevertheless, we are correct in saying that the true church is the Kingdom *in embryo*. Its members are kings and priests in an anticipatory sense.

In addition, we might think of the church in the present age as a stage in the development of the Kingdom of God. So there is a sense in which the Kingdom has already been established and is expanding, but all this is anticipatory to—and depends upon—the *eschatological* Kingdom. Without the future reality of the establishment of the Kingdom of God upon this earth, there is no sense in which the church is the Kingdom.

While parables such as those above may be easily misunderstood, especially in the absence of the prophetic foundation, some parables clearly place the Kingdom in the future.

In order to correct His disciples' mistaken belief that “the Kingdom of God should immediately appear,” an event they apparently associated with His entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 19:11), Jesus told them a parable. In the parable (recorded in Matthew 19:12-27), a nobleman went into a distant country to receive for himself a kingdom, and then returned. Before he left, he distributed ten pounds (about three months' wages) among his servants and instructed them to do business with the money until he returned. When he returned, having received the kingdom, he asked his servants to give him an account of how much each had gained through trading.

The first had increased his pound tenfold, and was rewarded with authority over ten cities. The second has increased his pound fivefold, and was given charge of five cities. The third had done nothing with his pound, so had no increase to show. His pound was taken away and given to the servant who had increased his pound tenfold.

The parable is clear. The nobleman is Christ; the distant country is heaven; the servants are Christ's disciples; the servants' use of the pounds in trading is the work the disciples are to accomplish until Christ returns; the nobleman's return from the distant country is Christ's return from heaven; and the rewards given to the profitable servants are the rewards Christ will give His disciples at His return.

Christ wanted to show His disciples that the Kingdom of God would *not* immediately appear, as they thought, but would appear *in the future—after His return!* At the time, the disciples did not fully understand the meaning of the parable, but Jesus knew that they would come to understand it later, and would use it as they preached the gospel of the coming Kingdom.

All the New Testament scriptures we have thus far seen agree perfectly with Old Testament prophecies and promises concerning the Davidic King and His Kingdom. While the New Testament writers did apply truths from prophecies about the Kingdom to the New Testament church, they never claimed that the establishment and expansion of the church fulfilled those prophecies.

But what of those passages that *seem* to suggest that the Kingdom is a present reality? Let's now look at some of the major "prooftexts" of the "Kingdom now" advocates.

"Kingdom Now" Theology

Early in His ministry, "Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17; cf. Mark 1:15). When He sent "the seventy" on a preparatory mission, He commanded them to "say unto them [who received them], The Kingdom of God is come nigh unto you" (Luke 10:11). Jesus said, "But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the Kingdom of God is come upon you" (Luke 11:20). When the Pharisees questioned Him on when the Kingdom would come, Jesus replied: "The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! Or, lo there! For, behold, the Kingdom of God is within you [or, correctly translated, "is in your midst"—NASB]" (Luke 17:20,21).

Notice that the Kingdom "is at hand," "is come nigh unto you," "is come upon you," and "is in your midst." Jesus *seems* to have been saying that the Kingdom was just about to appear, or that it was already at work and would soon expand. Here lies the premise upon which "Kingdom now" theology is constructed. If Jesus' ministry layed the foundation of the coming Kingdom, it would *seem* that the church that was founded soon after His resurrection *was* the Kingdom.

Jesus said, "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it," and, in the same context, promised to give to Peter "the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 16:18,19). Since Peter preached to the crowds on the Day of Pentecost, resulting in the conversion of thousands (Acts 2), and since Peter was sent to Cornelius the gentile, and witnessed the conversion of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10), it would *seem* that Peter was using the keys of the Kingdom—that, through him, the Kingdom was expanding.

A handful of other scriptures *seem* to support this view.

The apostle Paul wrote: “For the Kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). Notice that “the Kingdom of God is...righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” This would *seem* to suggest that the Kingdom is not a literal kingdom involving land, subjects, governors, and laws, but is a spiritual reality, or some internal “spark of goodness” that finds expression in charitable deeds and good works.

Paul further states that God “hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the Kingdom of His dear Son” (Colossians 1:13). Here, “power of darkness” is contrasted with “Kingdom of His dear Son,” and true Christians have already been delivered from the former and translated into the latter. Again, this *seems* to support the argument that the Kingdom was inaugurated on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was given.

Another commonly cited “proof text” is found in the book of Revelation. The apostle John, writing to the seven churches of Asia, described himself as “your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the Kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:9). Here, again, the Kingdom *seems* to be presented as a present reality.

The above are the major “proof texts” cited by those who believe the Kingdom is here, now, and was inaugurated in the time of the apostles. As we have seen, however, *many* scriptures speak of the Kingdom as a *future* reality—something that has not yet been established on this earth.

How do we resolve this seeming conflict? Is the Kingdom present or future? What did Paul mean when he said that true Christians have been “translated into the Kingdom of His dear Son”? And what did Jesus mean when He said that the Kingdom was “at hand,” has “come unto you,” and is “in your midst”?

The Presence of the Future

The seeming conflict can be easily resolved once we understand a principle so often overlooked by modern students of the Bible. That principle is set forth in Romans 4:17, where Paul tells us that “God...calleth those things which be not *as though they were*.” In other words, God speaks of the future *as if it were present*. This is the divine perspective. It is seen clearly in the words God gave directly to the ancients, and is reflected in the New Testament writings.

When the Sadducees questioned Jesus about the *future* resurrection, Jesus said, in His response: “But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Matthew 22:31,32).

Notice that the discussion was about the resurrection of the dead. At that time—yet *future*—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be raised from the dead. Yet, long after the patriarchs had died, God had said, “I *am* [notice the present tense] the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” God was speaking in the present tense, but He had the *future* in view. He was calling “those things that be not as though they were.”

Speaking of people *not yet born*, Jesus said, in prayer, “And the glory which thou gavest me I *have given* them...” (John 17:20,22). How could Jesus have given anything to people who did not even exist yet? Obviously, He was speaking of something that would be accomplished in the future *as though it had already been accomplished*.

Similarly, Paul said that “God hath chosen us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4). How could God have “chosen us” when none of us existed? We “existed” in the sense that God had decreed that humankind *would* exist. It might be said that when God decrees that something will be accomplished, it is “as good as done.”

The divine perspective is also seen in the last book of the Bible, where Jesus Christ is described as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8). Christ was not actually slain until thousands of years *after* the foundation of the world. He was slain *from* the foundation of the world only in the sense that God had decreed that He *would be* slain.

This principle of “the presence of the future” sheds significant light on scriptures that speak of the Kingdom as a present reality. True Christians are “in” the Kingdom of God in the same sense that Christ was slain from the foundation of the world. They are “in” the Kingdom in the sense that the Kingdom is their destiny—for God, who “calleth those things which be not as though they were,” has decreed it.

But what of Christ’s statement about the Kingdom being “in your midst”? Did he mean that the Kingdom was already there, in His time?

Remember, Jesus spoke the parable of the pounds (Matthew 19:12-27) in order to correct His disciples’ mistaken notion that the Kingdom would immediately appear. If the Kingdom had not appeared, why did Jesus say to the Pharisees, “The Kingdom of God is in your midst”? Is this a contradiction?

No! By simply understanding that “king” and “kingdom” are used interchangeably in Scripture (as in Daniel 2:38, where the “head of gold” represents both the king of Babylon and his kingdom), we can understand what Christ means. Christ, the King of the Kingdom, stood in the midst of the Pharisees. Thus, He said, “The Kingdom of God is in your midst.” The Kingdom was there in the Person of its King!

The *power* of the Kingdom was present in the ministry of Jesus, and of His apostles, and is present in the church today. The writer of the book of Hebrews said that God’s people have “tasted the good Word of God, and the *powers of the world to come*” (Hebrews 6:5). The “world to come” is the future Kingdom; and the power of the Kingdom, through the spiritual presence of the King, is with those who are doing the work of God today.

The presence of the power of the Kingdom explains how the Kingdom of God “is at hand,” “is come nigh unto you,” and “is come upon you.” But the actual *inauguration* of the Kingdom has *yet* to take place.

Why, then, the church?

The New Covenant will be made with the House of Israel and the House of Judah in the future. Why has God called a comparative few to enter into that covenant today?

The Church and the Kingdom

Jesus said, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell [*hades*] shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

The Greek word translated “church” is *ekklisia*, which comes from *ek* (out of) and *klesis* (a calling). It is used to describe a gathering, or an assembly. In the New Testament, it is used in reference to individual congregations as well as to the collective company of the saints throughout the world.

As we have seen, the church is not the Kingdom (except in the senses described above); it *awaits* the Kingdom. Members of the church, both from this age and previous ages, will meet Christ at His return and *reign* with Him upon this earth. Herein lies God's purpose for the church.

In a vision of the heavenly realm, the apostle John heard the "four living creatures" and "twenty-four elders," angelic beings who dwell in the presence of God, sing of Christ and of the calling and destiny of the church.

"And they sung a new song, saying, Thou [Christ] art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us [*them*, the saints] to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us [*them*, the saints] unto our God *kings and priests*: and we [*they*] shall *reign* on the earth" (Revelation 5:9,10).

To the church in Thyatira, Jesus Christ said: "And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give *power over the nations*: And he shall *rule* them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father" (Revelation 2:26,27).

To the church in Laodicea, Christ said: "To him that overcometh will I grant to *sit with me in my throne*, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in His throne" (Revelation 3:21).

Recall that in the parable of the pounds the profitable servants were given charge of *cities* when the nobleman (representing Christ) returned from the "far country" (representing heaven). Recall also that Daniel prophesied: "And the Kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the Kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High, whose Kingdom is an everlasting Kingdom, and all dominions [rulers] shall serve and obey Him" (Daniel 7:27).

The church, then is made up of those who will rule and reign with Christ when He establishes the Kingdom on this earth. God is preparing a people, a body of administrators and teachers ("kings and priests"), who will work under the direction of Christ in *changing* this world!

The present mission of the church is to proclaim the good news of the coming Kingdom, to make disciples of all nations by preaching a message of repentance and remission of sins in Christ's name (Matthew 28:19,20; Mark 16:15,16; Luke 24:47), and to *warn* the world of the coming time of tribulation that will precede the Second Coming of Christ.

Peter, mindful of Christ's prophecy of the tribulation to befall his people (Matthew 24), warned, "*Save yourselves* from this untoward generation" (Acts 2:40). *That* tribulation period came within forty years of Christ's prophecy. It befell the Jews, the descendants of the southern House of Judah. But remember, the prophets spoke of the time of "Jacob's trouble," a time when tribulation would befall the House of Judah *and* the House of Israel!

Just as Peter warned his people of the coming time of distress, saying, "Save yourselves from this untoward generation!" God's servants of our day are to warn *modern* Israel of the coming time of "Jacob's trouble"!

Remember, many prophecies are *dual* in nature. The horrifying tribulation of A.D. 70—when Jerusalem was sacked, the Temple destroyed, and tens of thousands of Jews

slain—was a *type* of the *future* tribulation that will befall the peoples of Israel and have a profound impact upon all nations.

From all indications, we are rapidly approaching that time! There remains only *one hope* for mankind!

The Kingdom of God: The Only Hope

While prospects for the immediate future are bleak, God’s Word assures us that a wonderful time of peace and prosperity lies beyond the dark days ahead.

When Christ, the prophesied Davidic King, returns to this earth, He will regather the scattered peoples of the House of Israel and the House of Judah, and establish a New Covenant with them. The newly reconstituted nation of Israel will become the model nation she was intended to be.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will there to see the complete and final fulfillment of the promises given to them. The apostles will be there, sitting on twelve thrones, judging the tribes of Israel. David, the prophets, and the saints from all eras of human history will be there to see, and participate in, the establishment of anew age—an age of peace, prosperity, and happiness.

Once the nations of this world realize the futility of their ways, having experienced the most horrible time in human history, they will look to the magnificent City of the Great King, and seek to learn of His ways, His laws.

“And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the Law, and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And He shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:3,4).

What a *wonderful* future!

When we consider the present, degenerate condition of the troubled world in which we live, we must surely realize that there is only one hope for the future of humankind.

Little wonder that the message of the Kingdom of God is called GOOD NEWS!☐