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**The Relationship
of the Church to the
Kingdom of God**

OVERVIEW

What is the major theme or purpose that encompasses God's overall master plan? Dr Pentecost believes that the drama of history revolves around the kingdom of God. This theme is traced from Genesis to Revelation, illustrating God's right to rule and the form that His kingdom takes through the various epochs of history. Anyone interested in the study of Bible prophecy has to deal with the vital issue of the role of the kingdom of God and how this important theme is developed throughout the Bible.

God is sovereign, and as Sovereign He rules eternally in a kingdom in which He is the absolute authority. In order to understand the biblical concept of "kingdom," we must recognize that it includes several ideas: the right to rule, a realm in which ruling authority is exercised, and the reality of that authority actually being exercised.

The Kingdom in Eternity

Concerning God's kingdom, the Bible presents two aspects: the eternal aspect and the temporal aspect. The eternal kingdom is characterized by four essential truths: 1) It is timeless; 2) it is universal; 3) it is providential; 4) it is miraculous.

In eternity past, before the creation of the angels, the earth, and man, a kingdom existed in the sphere of "the heavenlies" because of the relationship among the members of the Trinity. God the Father was sovereign. God the Son, although equal in person, was subordinate to the Father. God the Holy Spirit was the active executor of the will of the Father (Gen. 1:2-3). Thus in eternity past there was a kingdom, involving the right to rule, as well as the sphere in which the right operated and the rule was exercised. Indeed, all the elements essential to a kingdom were present. This kingdom arises from the character of God and reaches from eternity to eternity.

God's kingdom was displayed in the angelic realm before it was developed on the earth. The created angelic hosts in that kingdom were subject to the Sovereign, and they worshiped Him and obeyed Him. This continued until the fall of Lucifer and the angels who followed him in rebellion.

The Kingdom on Earth (Pre-Abrahamic)

To demonstrate His right to rule, God ordered this earthly sphere as the place where He would rule. He populated it with creatures who were responsible to recognize that right, submit to it, and give the Ruler that which was due Him. Our sovereign God, in every period of theocratic administration, has ruled through those to whom He assigned His authority. It was the responsibility of administrators to subjugate all to God's authority, to reward those

who do good, to punish evildoers, and to provide an atmosphere in which the subjects of the King might live in peace. In the garden, Adam was the theocratic administrator whose responsibility was to subject all creation to himself, so that through him creation might be subject to the authority of God. When this form of administration failed, God brought a judgment and expelled Adam and Eve from the garden.

God instituted a new form of theocratic administration in which He wrote His law in the hearts of men and subjected man to His law. That law was man's conscience (Rom. 2:15), and as men subjected themselves to the rule of conscience, they were in subjection to the authority of God. But that too failed. And when men rebelled against that form of theocratic administration, God wiped the human race off the face of the earth by a flood.

God then instituted a new form of theocratic administration in which authority was given to human government (Gen. 9:6). It was the responsibility of human government to curb lawlessness and to bring man in subjection to the authority of God. Again man failed miserably. And when men organized in open rebellion against God, "The Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel-because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world" (Gen. 11:8-9).

The Kingdom in Israel

With the call of Abraham, God introduced a new form of theocratic administration. He instituted the Abrahamic Covenant that promised Abraham a land, seed, and blessing. Throughout the Old Testament-through that expanding covenant program-God administered His theocracy here on earth.

The kingdom program was then developed with the nation Israel through the covenants God made with them: the Abrahamic (Gen. 15:18), the Davidic (2 Sam. 7:14), the New (Jer. 31:31-34), and the Palestinian (Deut. 28-30). These eternal, unconditional, irrevocable covenants determined the ultimate form of the kingdom of the God of heaven on earth.

While the covenants promised a kingdom here on earth, it was the prophets who described the glories of that kingdom. The prophets of the Old Testament had proclaimed a message of hope that caused Israel to eagerly anticipate the fulfillment of God's covenants and promises to them. David's son the Messiah would come to bring peace, righteousness, and prosperity to the nation. He would come as a Savior to redeem and as a Sovereign to reign. The nations which had persecuted Israel would be subjugated to Him, and Israel would know the promised peace which the Prince of Peace would bring. Her accumulated sins would be put away and she would experience forgiveness and life in righteousness. Such was the hope of Israel.

Years passed before an official proclamation was made by the prophesied forerunner, John the Baptist, who heralded his message to the nation: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2 NASB). When Jesus began His ministry He made the same proclamation: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17 NASB). The call to repentance shows that this was a contingent offer and that the blessings of the kingdom depended on the nation's response. This does not mean, however, it was not a genuine offer. The reference to the kingdom needed no explanation; it was the covenanted kingdom under David's son the Messiah, of which the prophets had so clearly spoken and for whom the nation was waiting. The nation was plunged into a great debate concerning His person. Who is this Jesus of Nazareth who claims to be the son of David and the Son of God? Is He what

He claims to be? If so, He truly is the promised and covenanted Messiah. If not, He is a blasphemous impostor who is worthy of death. Jesus made His claims concerning His person very clear. He validated those claims convincingly by His miracles, and He challenged people to accept His claims and to put faith in Him, so as to receive a righteousness from Him that would enable them to enter His forthcoming kingdom.

From the inception of His ministry two responses to His presentation were evident. John says: "He came to His own [things], and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (John 1:11-12). His rejection is clearly seen in the response of those in Nazareth, who heard Him claim to be the One who would fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1-2. These responses climax in the incident recorded in Matthew 12:22-24. There were those who, on the basis of the evidence He had presented about Himself as the son of David, the Messiah, expressed their willingness to accept Him as the Messiah. But there were also those who rejected the evidence and sought to explain it away, so that they would be guiltless for their rejection. There were two supernatural powers who could perform miracles: Satan and God. If the leaders acknowledged that Jesus performed miracles by God's power, they would be without excuse for their unbelief; but if He performed miracles by Satan's power, they could justify their rejection. Thus they sought to dissuade those who believed by saying: "This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons" (Matt. 12:24).

Jesus' Judgment Upon Israel

Jesus viewed the explanation by the leaders as indicative of the course which that generation would follow. He viewed His rejection as if it were final, although it would not be finalized until His trial and crucifixion. The message that He began to proclaim was no longer "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28 NASB), but rather it was a message of judgment. Viewing the nation as being confirmed in their rejection and unbelief, Jesus from this time on speaks of the judgment to come.

In the parable of the wicked vinedressers (Matt. 21:33-44), after the leaders kill the heir, God, the owner, will destroy those wicked men miserably (Matt. 21:41). So, too, "the kingdom of God will be taken from you [that generation in Israel] and given to a nation [or generation] bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder" (Matt. 21:43-44, author's translation). This signifies the withdrawal of the offer of the covenanted kingdom to Israel and its postponement to the future.

This same judgment is depicted in Matthew 22:1-7, where the guests (the nation Israel), who had been invited to a wedding banquet (Messiah's kingdom) but refused to come, suffered the consequences of rejecting the king's invitation. The king "sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city." This parable reveals the form of judgment: Roman armies, under Thus, would attack the city of Jerusalem, destroy it, and either kill or disperse its inhabitants.

Another specific prediction of the coming judgment is given in Matthew 23:37-24:2. Jesus declared He had sought to provide peace and security for Israel, but it was not experienced because "you were not willing." As a consequence, "Your house is left to you desolate" (Matt. 24:38). The house could refer to the temple, or to the city of Jerusalem, in which the temple stood, or to the Davidic house, whose throne would be left empty. The

severity of the judgment is seen in the declaration: "Not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (Matt. 24:2).

Luke is very specific in recording Jesus' message of judgment. In Luke 19:11-27 the nobleman declared, concerning the unfaithful, "Take the mina from him... but bring here those enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, and slay them before me." In this parable it is significant that judgment fell on those who refused to submit themselves to the One who had the right to reign. This was the sin of that generation in Israel.

Once again, the judgment is predicted forcefully in Luke 21:20-24: "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. For these are the days of vengeance that all things which are written may be fulfilled. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (NKJv).

Thus we see that the message of Jesus was initially a message of hope, of blessing, and of salvation. But after the announcement by the leaders that Jesus received His power from Satan, and so was a blasphemous impostor, His message turned to one of judgment on that generation in Israel. While this announcement did not cancel the covenants and promises given to Israel concerning the earthly kingdom of David's greater Son, but only postponed the realization of those hopes, yet it did consign that generation to a physical and temporal judgment which was inescapable (Luke 19:27). Thus the kingdom program for Israel, which began with such high hopes at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, ends with the somber note of judgment and postponement.

The Kingdom in the Present Age

In light of all this, the following questions arise. What happens to God's kingdom, of which the Davidic millennial kingdom is only an earthly form, in this present age when the millennial kingdom has been postponed? What form does the kingdom take in this present age? What are the essential characteristics or features of God's kingdom in this present age?

In answer, Jesus referred to "the secrets of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:11). He was not referring to the covenanted Davidic, or millennial, kingdom. That there would be such a kingdom was no "secret" in the Old Testament! It clearly revealed the essential features or characteristics of the millennial kingdom. But what the Old Testament had not revealed was that an entire age would intervene between the offer of the kingdom by the Messiah and Israel's reception of the King and enjoyment of full kingdom blessings. With this background, we see that the time period covered by the parables in Matthew 13 extends from Israel's rejection until its future reception of the Messiah. Thus this new program began while Christ was still on the earth, and it will extend until His return to the earth in power and great glory.

Matthew 13

This period includes the time from Pentecost, in Acts 2, to the rapture; that is, the age of grace (which we also call the age of the Holy Spirit, or the church age). Although this period includes the church age, it extends beyond it, for the parables of Matthew 13 precede Pentecost and extend beyond the rapture. Thus these parables do not primarily concern the

nature, function, and influence of the church. Rather, they show the previously unrevealed form in which God's theocratic rule would be exerted in a previously unrevealed age, made necessary by Israel's rejection of Jesus Christ. In Matthew 13 there are eight parables, each one providing an essential characteristic of the kingdom in this present age.

Seed, sowers, and soils. The first feature of this age is that it is characterized by a sowing of the seed by sowers and by varied responses to the sowing. In this parable, the seed (Matt. 13:3-8) represents the word, or "the message about the kingdom," and the field represents the "heart" of the individual hearer (v. 19). In Scripture, the "heart" often indicates intellectual capacity. A message, then, was being proclaimed and heard, but there were varying responses. Some seed showed no sign of life at all (that sown by the wayside). Some produced no fruit (that sown on rocky places). Some seed gave promise of bearing fruit but was eventually fruitless (that sown among the thorns). Finally there was seed that produced a crop, yielding a 100, 60, or 30 times what was sown (v. 23).

Mark recorded another parable by Jesus on the theme of sowing seed. This parable (Mark 4:26-29) was designed to teach that the fruit depends not on the sower but on the life that is in the seed itself. Regardless of what the sower did, the seed germinated, sprouted, grew, produced grain, and eventually yielded a bountiful harvest, which the man reaped. Jesus wanted to make it clear that any harvest they saw would be the result of sowing and then allowing the life in the seed to manifest itself by growth and yield.

Weeds among wheat. The second parable (13:24-29) was designed to supplement the first to teach that there would be a false sowing alongside the sowing of the Word of God. The field had been sown with good seed, and the sower could anticipate a harvest for his labors. Later, the sower was told that an enemy had sown the field with the seed of weeds.

This false sowing evidently took place immediately after the good seed had been sown. Then both kinds of seed germinated and sprouted. In the process of waiting for the harvest, it became evident that weeds had been sown in the wheat field. The presence of weeds would crowd out the growth of the fruit-bearing wheat. The servants, concerned as they were with the results of their labors, suggested that they try to remove the weeds from the field. However, the owner of the field recognized that it would be impossible to remove the weeds without destroying the wheat. So the servants were commanded to let both ripen, and at the time of wheat harvest they would then separate the good grain from the worthless weeds, without destroying the wheat. The weeds could be burned and destroyed, while the wheat would be gathered into storage. Through this parable Jesus prepared these men to be on guard for Satan's work of sowing false seed, or false doctrine, while they were sowing the good seed. Satan's false kingdom would continue to exist alongside the new form of God's kingdom.

The mustard seed. The third parable (13:31-32) reveals that this new form of the kingdom will have an almost imperceptible beginning. The emphasis in the parable is on the contrast between the size of the seed and the plants that are produced. "Small as a mustard seed" was a Jewish proverb to indicate a very minute particle. But out of that insignificant seed in one year would grow a plant which became large enough for birds to nest in. In Ezekiel 31:6 and Daniel 4:12, the figure of a spreading tree, in which birds lodge, indicates a great kingdom that can protect and provide benefits for many peoples. Christ would commission only 11 men to become His emissaries (John 17:18). This would seem to be an insignificant beginning, yet Jesus predicted that the world would hear His message from such a small beginning. Thus the parable teaches that the new form of the kingdom, while it did have an insignificant beginning, would eventually spread to the ends of the earth.

The hidden leaven. The fourth parable (13:33) was designed to show how the kingdom program would develop and operate in the present age. Some have referred to this as "The Parable of the Leaven," but that title puts emphasis on what leaven is or signifies. Actually, this is "The Parable of Leaven Hidden in Meal." In other words, the parable emphasizes what leaven does or how leaven works. When the leaven, or yeast, was introduced into the flour, a process began that was steady, continuous, and irreversible. That process continued until the whole mixture was leavened. Thus Jesus was teaching that the kingdom would not be established by outward means, since no external force could make the dough rise. Rather, this new form of the kingdom would operate according to an internal force that would be continuous and progressive until the whole mixture had been leavened. Here the emphasis was on the Holy Spirit and concerned His ministry to the world. Christ would again speak of this in John 15:26 and 16:7-11.

Hidden treasure and the expensive pearl, The fifth and sixth parables reveal what accrues to God through the kingdom in this present age. In the "Parable of the Treasure Hidden in the Field" (13:44), Jesus revealed that a multitude from Israel will become God's purchased possession through this present age. In the "Parable of the Merchant Looking for Fine Pearls" (13:45-46), Jesus revealed that God will obtain a treasure not only from the nation Israel but from the Gentiles as well. We understand this because a pearl comes out of the sea, and quite frequently in Scripture the sea represents Gentile nations. So again we see that a treasure from among the Gentiles becomes God's by purchase.

The dragnet. The seventh parable (vv. 47-50) reveals that this new form of the kingdom will conclude in a judgment separating the righteous from the unrighteous. The net drawn up from the sea brings all kinds of fish, some useful and some useless. Through this parable Christ taught that the age will end in a judgment to determine who enters the future millennial kingdom and who is excluded.

Righteousness is a prerequisite for entrance into the kingdom. The righteous are taken into it, but the unrighteous are excluded. The destiny of the wicked is not the blessing of the kingdom, but rather the judgment of eternal fire. This same truth, concerning the judgment prior to the institution of the millennial kingdom, is taught in Matthew 25:1-30, where Christ predicted judgment on the nation Israel, and in verses 31-46 where He described judgment on living Gentiles. The judgment predicted here is not a judgment on the dead but on the living, and it will take place at the time of Christ's second advent to the earth.

The householder The eighth and final parable of Matthew 13 is that of the householder (v. 52), which teaches that some features of the new form of the kingdom are identical to features previously revealed about the new and have no correspondence to what had been revealed about the millennial form of the kingdom.

As we survey the Matthew 13 parables, we find that in light of Israel's rejection of Christ, He foresaw postponement of the millennial form of the kingdom. He announced the introduction of a new form of the kingdom, one that would span the period from Israel's rejection of Christ until Israel's future reception of Christ at His second advent.

This present age, with its new form of the kingdom, is characterized by the sowing of the Word, to which there will be varying responses depending on the soil's preparation (the soils). The harvest that results from the sowing is the result of the life that is in the sown seed (the seed growing of itself). Concurrent with the sowing of the Word is a false counter-sowing (the weeds). The new form of the kingdom had an insignificant beginning, but it will grow to great proportions (the mustard seed). The power in the kingdom is not external but internal (the leaven hidden in meal). God will gather a peculiar treasure to Himself through this

present age (the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price). The present form of the kingdom will end in a judgment to determine who are righteous, and therefore eligible to enter the future millennial form of the kingdom, as well as who are unrighteous thus to be excluded from the millennial kingdom to come.

This revelation of the new form through which the theocracy would be administered in this present age was followed by a specific prophecy: "I will build My church" (Matt. 16:18). The nature and function of the church is not explained here, but it is revealed in its historical development in the book of Acts, with its doctrines explained in the epistles.

The Kingdom in Acts

Following His resurrection, Jesus spent time with those whom He had chosen (John 15:16), instructing them concerning the new form of the kingdom and preparing them for their ministry of introducing that new form to Jew and Gentile alike. He reiterated His promise of empowerment by the Holy Spirit for the work of their ministry. On Pentecost the promised Spirit was poured out and indwelt believers as His temple. In the book of Acts their ministry of proclaiming the new message of the new form of the kingdom is recorded, by which the gospel was proclaimed and spread throughout the world.

The kingdom of God in this present age, formed through the preaching of the gospel would be made up of Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles. This was made clear to Peter in the vision given to him in Acts 10. When Peter, in obedience to the Levitical law, refused to eat that which was unclean, he was told, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (v. 15). To make sure there was no misunderstanding, the command was repeated three times. It later became apparent that Peter understood that the distinctions inherent in the Levitical law had been removed, for when he was in the house of Cornelius he declared, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear Him and do what is right" (vv. 34-35).

Peter felt free to proclaim the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles assembled in Cornelius' house. In response to their faith, "The Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message" (v. 44). The evidence that Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit was that they spoke with tongues (v. 46). Tongues were evidence to the apostles of the genuine conversion of the Gentiles and of their inclusion in the body of believers. In response, these Gentiles showed their identification with Jesus Christ and the company of believers by being baptized.

Even so, Jerusalem had to be convinced of God's acceptance of Gentiles into the church and the kingdom. So Peter testified to the genuineness of their conversion by recounting in his dream what had happened next. And those in Jerusalem, "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life' (11:18). This question was submitted to the apostles in Jerusalem, and Peter testified to the salvation of the Gentiles by faith in Jesus Christ apart from the law (15:7-11). His testimony is further corroborated by Barnabas and Paul (v. 12), and James, who presided at this council and rendered its decision. It was evident that God was dealing with Gentiles as Gentiles, "taking from the Gentiles a people for Himself" (v. 14)

James found this in keeping with the prophetic program. In Amos 9:11-12 it was prophesied that after the period in which Israel was disciplined because of disobedience (vv. 9-10), and the Davidic throne left empty for a time, the Davidic throne would be restored and

the Davidic kingdom would be instituted. When it is reinstated, the kingdom will include not only the physical descendants of Abraham but also a multitude of Gentiles. Therefore the restored Davidic kingdom under its rightful Davidic king would be composed of both Jews and Gentiles. In that kingdom Gentiles would not be made into Jews; instead, they would be in the kingdom as Gentiles. This allowed James to conclude that if God had a program for Gentiles, as Gentiles, in the future Davidic kingdom established here on the earth, there was no reason to deny that God could include Gentiles, as Gentiles, in this present form of the theocracy. Through faith in Jesus Christ, Gentiles are equal participants with believing Jews in the present form of the kingdom of God.

Paul's life was dedicated to the preaching of the grace of God. He wrote, "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again" (Acts 20:25). Paul clearly equated preaching the gospel of the grace of God with the preaching of the kingdom of God. Once again we see that the two terms are used interchangeably, as in 28:23 when Paul arrived in Rome and "they arranged to meet Paul on a certain day and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets." Again the preaching of the gospel was referred to as testimony concerning the kingdom of God. And in verses 30-31 this identification was again made, where "for two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ."

Thus as we survey Paul's ministry from the book of Acts, we see him as an ambassador of the kingdom of God, but his message was salvation through the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. No reference is made to support the notion that the earthly Davidic kingdom had been established. Rather, the message concerns entrance into a present form of the kingdom of God by faith in Jesus Christ.

Uses of "the Kingdom"

While there are many references to the kingdom in the New Testament epistles, on closer examination we find the term "the kingdom" used in several different ways.

It is used of the future earthly Davidic kingdom to be established at the second advent of Jesus Christ. In 2 Timothy 4:1 Paul wrote, "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of His appearing and His kingdom, I give you this charge." This must refer to the earthly Davidic kingdom that will be established on earth, since that is the kingdom which will follow the second advent of Jesus Christ and the judgments associated with that momentous event (Matt. 25:1-46).

Paul also wrote, "Christ, the firstfruits; then, when He comes, those who belong to Him. The end will come, when He hands over the kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed all dominion, authority and power" (1 Cor. 15:23-24). Here Paul outlined a resurrection program that began with the resurrection of Christ and will continue with the resurrection of those that are Christ's at His second advent. The completion of the resurrection program does not come until after the reign of Christ here on earth, following His second coming. At the conclusion of that resurrection program, Christ will have delivered up the kingdom to God (v. 24). It is quite obvious, therefore, that the kingdom referred to here is the millennial kingdom over which Christ reigns on earth, following His second advent. Thus the idea of a future earthly Davidic kingdom is not at all foreign to the apostle's thinking.

Besides the future earthly Davidic kingdom, we also find that the future eternal kingdom is referred to in the epistles. In 2 Timothy 4:18 Paul declared, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom." Paul obviously was anticipating the eternal reign of Christ in His eternal kingdom. Peter declared, "You will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:11). Peter likewise was anticipating his participation in that eternal reign of Christ.

Elsewhere Paul wrote, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable" (1 Cor. 15:50). Here Paul seems to be using "kingdom of God" in reference to the eternal state of the believer. Thus "kingdom" or "kingdom of God" may refer to the eternal reign of Christ.

While the term "kingdom" is used in these two senses in the epistles, its third and most common use, by far, is in reference to the present form of the kingdom, that into which a believer enters by faith in Jesus Christ. Paul stated that God "has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13-14). Here the phrase "the kingdom of the Son He loves" is equated with the redemption and the forgiveness of sins received by faith in Jesus Christ.

In Galatians 5:19-21 Paul listed the works of the flesh and then declared "that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." He made a similar statement in Ephesians 5:3-5, where he listed grievous sins of the flesh and then stated that those who participate in such things do not have "any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God" (Eph. 5:5). This concept is also found in 1 Corinthians 6:9,10. In these passages Paul is saying that men who are characterized by these sins are not saved, because it is evident they have never received by faith the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ. Therefore they are not participants in the kingdom of God. Thus we see again that the term "kingdom of God" is equated with salvation and must refer to participation in or exclusion from the present kingdom form.

Believers are exhorted to live lives worthy of God, who calls them into His kingdom and glory (1 Thess. 2:12). Here Paul seems to be referring to the participation of believers in the present form of the kingdom, who consequently are to walk worthy of that position. Paul commended the Thessalonians for their faithfulness and patience in the midst of persecutions and testings (2 Thess. 1:4), which validated their membership in the kingdom. By that conduct they were deemed "worthy of the kingdom of God," for which they were suffering (v. 5). Paul was not encouraging them to have patience and faithfulness in order to be able to participate in a future millennial kingdom; but, rather, to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of their participation in the kingdom's present form.

Paul told the Corinthians, "The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power" (1 Cor. 4:20). In other words, if those in Corinth were actually saved and in the kingdom of God, they would demonstrate that by manifesting the power of the kingdom in their daily lives. Mere profession was not a sufficient demonstration of salvation or participation in the kingdom of God; that relationship must be established and demonstrated by the work of the Holy Spirit, who is the power in the present form of the kingdom of God.

James made reference to the kingdom in James 2:5, where he asserted that entrance into that kingdom is for those who are "rich in faith." A popular Jewish concept said that he whom the Lord loves He makes rich, and that those who had material wealth received it because God approved of their righteousness. Therefore, many sought riches as a basis for assurance of their acceptance by God. James, however, said that it is not those who are rich

in this world's goods, but those who are rich in faith, who will "inherit the kingdom." Like Paul and Peter, James equated participation in the kingdom with salvation received by faith.

As a final note, according to Colossians 4:11 Paul considered himself a laborer on behalf of the kingdom of God, and he saw those faithful servants who worked with him as fellow workers in the kingdom.

From this survey, then, we see that the most frequent reference to the "kingdom" or the "kingdom of God" in the epistles is a reference to the present form of the kingdom, in which individuals by faith in Jesus Christ, and because of His death and resurrection, receive salvation and the gift of eternal life. All these are a part of the kingdom of God.

The Covenants in the Epistles

As we have already seen, biblical covenants dominated the thinking of the writers of Old Testament Scripture. And while those covenants play a prominent role in the Gospels, little reference is made to covenants in the New Testament epistles. This supports the idea that during this present age, in which a new form of the kingdom is being developed, God has temporarily set aside the nation of Israel, His covenant people, and is developing a new kingdom program.

Romans

We must also recognize, however, that the New Testament writers most certainly recognize the existence of the biblical covenants and refer to them when appropriate. For example, Paul, in his great epistle to the Romans, wrote to vindicate the righteousness of God. Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, argued that God is righteous in judging sinners (1:18-3:20). He is righteous in justifying men by faith (3:21-5:21). He is righteous in providing for a believer's sanctification by identifying him with Christ in His death and resurrection (6:1-8:27). And He is righteous in providing for the believer's ultimate glorification (vv. 28-39).

Paul then showed that God is righteous in dealing with the nation Israel (Rom. 9-11). Paul proved this by pointing out that Israel's hope is based on the covenants and promises God gave to that people (9:4), but that those promises will only be realized by those who have Abraham's faith (vv. 6-13). God is sovereign in His display of mercy (vv. 14-24), and God's mercy may be extended even to the Gentiles (vv. 25-33). Therefore, Israel's covenanted promises are not realized, not because God is unfaithful, but because Israel refused to acknowledge their sin and to believe God (10:1-21).

Paul also said that though Israel has been set aside and is not now experiencing the fulfillment of the covenants, that does not mean God is unfaithful, for some in Israel are experiencing the blessings of salvation (11:1-6). In fact, the setting aside of Israel opens the door of opportunity to the Gentiles to find the salvation through Israel's Messiah (vv. 7-12). Israel, in keeping with the sovereign purposes of God, had been put in the place of blessing and became the channel through which God would accomplish His purposes in the world. Israelis viewed as a branch in a tree, drawing its life from the root. But because the nation was an unproductive branch it was cut off, and wild branches, that is the Gentiles, were grafted in. The Gentiles were put in the place of blessing and could by grace draw life from the root.

Warning was then given to the Gentiles that if they became unfruitful branches, they could be removed just as Israel had been removed. But the setting aside of Israel was not permanent, only temporary. Paul wrote, "if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!" (v. 24). Paul assured his readers that, "The Deliverer will come from Zion; He will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is My covenant with them when I take away their sins" (vv. 26-27).

We can see clearly that in the analogy of the olive tree, Paul was viewing the root as the covenant that put Israel in a privileged position and guarantees restoration to that position when the Deliverer comes out of Zion and turns away ungodliness from Jacob. God's covenant program was prominent in the apostle's thinking as he vindicated the faithfulness of God in dealing with His people Israel.

Hebrews

Since the writer to the Hebrews was writing to Jewish believers, it's not surprising that we would find reference to the covenants in that epistle.

In Hebrews 5, in order to contrast the priesthood of Christ with the Aaronic priests, the writer referred to Psalm 110:4 where Christ was appointed high priest after the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 5:10). The Melchizedekian priesthood of Christ was then developed in chapters 7-8. The author went on to point out that the Aaronic priests derived their authority from the Mosaic covenant, but of the priesthood of Christ the author says, "The ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which He is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises" (8:6).

Some feel that the "superior covenant" is a reference to the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34, which was instituted for the house of Israel and the house of Judah by the death of Jesus Christ. This understanding may have some validity. However, the better covenant also may refer to the covenant God the Father made with God the Son at the time of His ascension into glory. There are two aspects to this covenant.

First, in Psalm 2:6-9 we read, "I have installed My King on Zion, My holy hill.' I will proclaim the decree of the Lord: He said to Me, 'You are My Son; today I have become Your Father. Ask of Me, and I will make the nations Your inheritance, the ends of the earth Your possession. You will rule them. with an iron scepter; You will dash them to pieces like pottery.'" Here the psalmist recorded a decree, or covenant, that God the Father made with God the Son, which guarantees the Son the right to rule. The begetting of the Son referred to (v. 7) has to do with appointment to authority. This authority was conferred on Christ at the time of His enthronement at the right hand of the Father following His ascension.

The second aspect of the Father's covenant with the Son is recorded in Psalm 110, where the Father welcomed the Son into glory at the time of His ascension. There, He is seated at the Father's right hand until the time comes for Him to exercise the authority conferred on Him. There, He also is appointed "a Priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (v. 4). In other words, by the Father's covenants with the Son, the Son was given authority to rule as King Priest.

It may well be this covenant to which the writer of Hebrews refers in 8:6. The covenant that was the basis of the authority of the Aaronic priest was a conditional covenant, but the covenant that constituted Jesus Christ as King-Priest forever was unconditional, and therefore it is considered a better covenant, established on better promises.

The writer to the Hebrews makes specific reference to the new covenant in verses 7-13, where he quoted Jeremiah 31:31-34. And while some say that the writer was quoting Jeremiah's new covenant in order to assert that the church supplants Israel as a covenant people, and that there is no future for the nation Israel, a careful study of the context reveals that this is not the author's intent.

Some to whom the author was writing still believed that the Mosaic covenant was a permanent covenant, and that men therefore were bound by the Mosaic law. It was the author's intent to show that even during the period in which the Mosaic law operated, it was viewed as a temporary, not a permanent, arrangement. He did this by quoting Jeremiah 31:31-34, to show that when God served notice that He would take away the Mosaic covenant and institute a new covenant with the house of Israel and of Judah, He was serving notice that the Mosaic covenant was a temporary and transitory covenant.

This is the point the writer was making when he said, "By calling this covenant 'new,' He has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear" (Heb. 8:13). The writer made no attempt whatsoever to show that while the "old" covenant was made with Israel, the new covenant was made with the church so that believers today become God's people in place of Israel. However, he did effectively demonstrate that the Mosaic order was a temporary arrangement and consequently not binding on believers, who are participants in the new form of the kingdom.

In 10:16-17, the writer again made reference to the new covenant, quoting portions of Jeremiah 31:31-34. In that covenant God promised, "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." The author was pointing out the limitations of the Old Testament sacrifices. At best, they provided only a temporary covering for sins, referring of course to that which was accomplished on the day of atonement. In contrast to that, the one sacrifice made by Jesus Christ put sins away permanently.

Therefore, instituting the new covenant with Israel by the death of Jesus Christ means there is no further need for the animal sacrifices required under the Mosaic law. This is the point: "Where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin" (Heb. 10:18). The answer, to those who felt that animal sacrifices continued to be efficacious, was to refer to the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34, and to recognize that what was promised there had been instituted. Sins have been put away, so there is no further need for animal sacrifices. The writer further asserted in Hebrews 12:24 that Jesus is "the Mediator of a new covenant." Consequently, God is not dealing with sins on the basis of animal sacrifices but on the basis of the all-sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Another reference to the covenant is made in Hebrews 13:20-21: "May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing His will, and may He work in us what is pleasing to Him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen." The covenant here must of necessity refer to the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34, since the blood of that covenant brings the believer to perfection or maturity. That covenant is referred to here as an "eternal covenant." This new covenant is in contrast to the Mosaic covenant which, as the writer of Hebrews has already shown, was viewed even during its time of operation as a temporary covenant.

This new covenant is an everlasting covenant. It is on the basis of the blood of this covenant that God will deal with sin. The work of Christ was to provide salvation and to bring all things into subjection to God's authority, so that this covenant will never need to be superseded by a better one.

It must be noted that, though reference is made to Israel's covenants in writing epistles to believers in the church, it does not mean that the church becomes Israel or deprives Israel of a future fulfillment of the covenants made with that nation.

Whenever "Israel" is used in the Scripture, whether in reference to an individual (Rom. 11:1) or a nation (9:4), without exception it refers to those who are physical descendants of Abraham. Paul makes this clear when he defines an Israelite as "a descendent of Abraham" in 11:1. Gentiles, by faith in Christ and by virtue of their relationship to Christ, who is a descendant of Abraham, are called the seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:29). The covenants were made with the physical descendants of Abraham. Those related to Abraham by faith may receive benefits from the covenants God gave that people, but they do not supplant the nation as recipients of the covenants.

The covenants did provide for universal blessings, which are applicable to Gentiles and to the church. Universal blessing was part of the Abrahamic promises (Gen. 12:3), which are fulfilled through Christ as Abraham's seed. Universal blessings are promised through the Davidic covenant, for Gentiles will be a part of the kingdom ruled over by David's son (Luke 2:10). These blessings come on the Gentiles who participate in Messiah's earthly rule. Universal blessings are promised through the new covenant (Joel 2:28-32). These blessings will be experienced by Gentiles when the Spirit is poured out on all flesh, so that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (v. 32). However, the enjoyment of these blessings that flow from Israel's covenants does not mean that the nation will not eventually enjoy the fullness of those blessings into which we enter by faith today.

Four Realms of Authority

Following Israel's rejection of the Messiah, a new form of theocratic administration was instituted. Rather than investing authority in one individual, who would exercise authority in every realm of life, authority was assigned to administrators in four different realms in which we all live: the civil realm, the home, employment, and the religious realm. Those in authority in these four realms are effectively God's administrators, and to them is given the responsibility of curbing lawlessness in those realms and bringing man into subjection to God's authority in each of them.

Civil Government

The first realm is that of civil government. Paul in Romans 13:1-7, and Peter in 1 Peter 2:13-14, set forth a universal principle that all men are to be in subjection to governmental authorities. The reason obedience is commanded is because these authorities are God's ministers (Rom. 13:4).

Obviously a governmental authority is not a minister of the gospel; he is, however, an administrator of the theocracy in that portion of the kingdom to which he has been assigned. It is therefore the responsibility of the civil authority to curb lawlessness, to punish evildoers, to reward those who obey the law, and to provide an atmosphere in which righteousness may flourish and men may live in peace without fear. The authority of the civil ruler extends even to the removal of the lawless by death, the sword being the symbol of that power. As these civil administrators exercise their God-given authority and provide benefits for men as they exercise that authority, they are to be supported by taxes and respected because of the position they hold as God's administrators in His kingdom.

The Home

The second sphere of authority is the sphere of the home. It was developed by Paul in Ephesians 5:21-33 and by Peter in 1 Peter 3:1-7. These writers make it clear that the responsibility to curb lawlessness in the home is placed on the husband. Wives are to be in subjection to their husbands, because in subjecting themselves to their husbands they are showing subjection to the Lord. Similarly, responsibility is placed on children to recognize the authority of parents and to submit themselves to the rule of their parents. In so doing they are subjecting themselves to the rule of God. Sarah's submission to Abraham is given as an example of the submission that God requires (v. 6), and where these principles of submission are practiced the Lord will be ruling in that home. That home, in short, will constitute a miniature theocracy.

Relationships in this sphere were designed according to God's principles of marriage, which were laid down in the Garden of Eden to show the relationship existing between a believer and God. The husband or father portrays the authority that belongs to Christ, and he is to exercise his responsibilities in such a way that reflects the love and care Christ exercises over His own. Likewise, the wife represents the believer, and as the believer is rightly subject to the authority of Christ, so she portrays this relationship by subjection to her husband.

A home is not a Christian home because all in that home are Christians. A home cannot be considered a Christian home and a model of the theocracy unless those in the home are rightly related to each other according to God's established laws of marriage. Peter pointed out that one of the practical results of this relationship will be that an unbelieving husband may be brought to the Lord by the gracious submission of the wife to his authority.

It is crucial to recognize that the wife was not subjected to the authority of her husband as a punishment imposed on Eve for her rebellion against the revealed law of God. Rather, it was as a protection for her. She was relieved of the responsibility of making decisions. That responsibility is placed on her husband. Her responsibility is to submit to his protection and oversight. In this arrangement, the more difficult responsibility is given to the husband, who is commanded to love his wife as Christ also loved the church (Eph. 5:25).

Employer and Employee

The third realm in which lawlessness may abound, and in which God assigns administrative authority, is in the sphere of employment.

Paul dealt with this in Ephesians 6:5-9, while Peter addressed it in 1 Peter 2:18-20. The apostles commanded slaves and hired servants to recognize and to submit to the authority of their masters or employers because God has given administrative responsibility in the form of the theocracy to the employer in that realm. The submission that is given by the employee to the employer is the same submission he is expected to give to Christ. In submitting to Christ's administrator, he is submitting himself to Christ. Consequently any service that the employee renders his employer is viewed as a service for Christ.

Of course, an employer is responsible to treat employees as Christ would treat them, and in fact he is reminded that he is a servant of a Master who is in heaven. Thus they are Christ's representatives in that realm as theocratic administrators.

The Church

The fourth and final realm in which lawlessness may occur is within the religious realm, or the church itself. Peter in 1 Peter 5:1-7 deals with this sphere.

The elders with whom Peter identified himself were overseers of the flock. The flock refers to the body of believers, meaning that the elders are responsible to oversee the flock, so as to curb lawlessness and to bring those in the flock into subjection to the authority of Jesus Christ. It is their responsibility to feed the flock. The word "feed" includes the thought of taking care of every need the flock may have. They need to be fed, they need to be watered, they need to be led and guided, and they need to be corrected or disciplined. These are the responsibilities resting on those who are administrators in this part of the theocracy.

Peter commanded the younger ones (this would refer to the members of the flock) to submit themselves to the elders (v. 5). Logically, submission given by members of the flock to their shepherds is submission to Christ. When this proper relationship exists in the church we find a perfect miniature theocracy.

Thus we see that by dividing authority into the civil realm, the realm of the home, the realm of employment, and the realm of the church, administration is provided in all the spheres in which we live. The principle is the same in each sphere: Submission to the administrator is submission to Christ. Through this process Christ is effectively ruling through delegated representatives, to provide a kingdom in which peace prevails and righteousness persists, in which lawlessness is curbed, and in which those living in that kingdom can enjoy the blessings of Christ's rule.

Summary

God, in previous forms of theocratic administration, had centralized the authority in one individual or in one arrangement (as in human government). However, in the present age He has divided authority in four different realms, thus limiting the area committed to any administrator in the kingdom. The responsibility of those administrators is the same in any previous form: to bring those under their authority into submission to God, to maintain law and order, and to provide an atmosphere in which men may live in peace, because they are in subjection to appointed human authority and consequently to divine authority.

Thus we conclude that the church is a part of a kingdom of the God of heaven, falling in the inter-advent period. It was an unrevealed mystery in the Old Testament, but it was necessitated by Israel's rejection of the Messiah, which caused the postponement of the promised and covenant form of the kingdom, which will be inaugurated by the appearance of the King of kings and Lord of lords at His second advent.

The Eternal Kingdom

While the major emphasis in the epistles is on the present form of the kingdom, there is an anticipation of the merger of the present form of the kingdom into the Davidic kingdom to be established at the second advent of the Messiah, and the eventual merger of that Davidic kingdom into the eternal kingdom over which Messiah will rule by divine appointment. Paul sees this in 1 Corinthians 15:27-28, where at the end of His earthly rule, when all has been brought into subjection to the Father, either willingly or through judgment, the Father will assign rulership over the eternal kingdom to the Son. Thus, for the unending ages of

eternity, God's fight to rule will be recognized. All in that kingdom will be in submission to Him and will join in worship of the Sovereign forever.