

THE COMING KINGDOM, PART XXIV
by Andy Woods

Today's evangelical world believes that the church is experiencing the Messianic kingdom. To address this type of confusion, we began a study chronicling what the Bible teaches about the kingdom. In this series, the biblical teaching on the kingdom has been surveyed from Genesis to Revelation. We have noted thus far that what the Old Testament predicts concerning an earthly kingdom was offered to Israel during Christ's First Advent. Yet, the nation rejected this kingdom offer leading to the kingdom's postponement. In the interim, the kingdom is future as God now pursues an interim program that includes the church.

In addition, we began scrutinizing a series of texts that "kingdom now" theologians routinely employ in order to argue that the kingdom is a present reality in order to show that none of these passages, when rightly understood, teach a present, spiritual form of the kingdom. We began with the use of alleged "kingdom now" texts in the earthly ministry of Christ, such as "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:5-7), "seek first His kingdom" (Matt. 6:33), "until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence" (Matt. 11:12), "the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28), "the kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:21), "unless one is born again he cannot...enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:3-5), and "some...who are standing here...will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (Matt. 16:28).

KINGDOM TAKEN FROM ISRAEL AND GIVEN TO THE CHURCH?

Yet another statement by Christ used by "kingdom now" theologians is found in Matthew 21:43, which says, "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it." Debate persists concerning *from* whom the kingdom

is taken and *to* whom it is given. "Kingdom now" theologians argue that Christ in verse 43 is teaching that the kingdom will be permanently taken away *from* Israel and instead given in spiritual form *to* the church. However, for *two* primary reasons, this theology of replacement is not supported by this passage. *First*, the replacement theologian errs in asserting that the kingdom was to be taken away *from* Israel as a whole. The context indicates that Christ was only speaking to first-century Israel. Matthew 21:45 says, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them." This first-century group of unbelieving Israel and her religious leader is the exclusive group that the kingdom was to be taken away *from* rather than Israel as a whole at all times and places.

Second, the replacement theologian errs in asserting that the church is the nation that is *to* receive the kingdom. The "nation" in question cannot be the church since the church is not a nation. In Romans 10:19, Paul writes, "But I say, surely Israel did not know, did they? First Moses says, "I WILL MAKE YOU JEALOUS BY THAT WHICH IS NOT A NATION, BY A NATION WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING WILL I ANGER YOU." Here, Paul explains how God's present blessing on the church is currently provoking unbelieving Israel to jealousy. In this description Paul calls the church a non-nation. The singular noun "nation" *ethnos* is twice used here to depict the church's lack of national status. After all, the church does not consist of a single nation but rather consists of believers in Jesus Christ from all nations (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:14-15; Col. 3:11; Rev. 5:9). Some use First Peter 2:9 to support the idea that the church is a nation. However, this argument incorrectly assumes that First Peter was written to the church at large rather than merely to the believing Jews in the Diaspora.¹

Rather than seeing the nation as the church, it seems far better to conclude that the nation spoken of in Matthew 21:43 is a future generation of believing Jews. This view fits well with the

remaining context of Matthew's Gospel, which speaks of a physical and spiritual future restoration of national Israel (Matt. 23:38-39; 24:31; 25:31). Furthermore, the word nation (*ethnos*) that is translated "people" or "nation" in Matthew 21:43 is used of national Israel elsewhere in Scripture, such as in John 11:51 and Acts 24:17.² Thus, contrary to the "kingdom now" rendering of Matthew 21:43 that the kingdom will be taken away from Israel as a whole and instead given in spiritual form to the church, the verse when taken in context actually teaches that the kingdom will be taken away from first-century Israel only and instead given to future believing national Israel in the coming Tribulation period and millennial kingdom.

MY KINGDOM IS NOT OF THIS WORLD

Yet another statement by Christ used by "kingdom now" theologians is found in John 18:36, where Christ said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." "Kingdom now" theologians use this verse to teach that Christ's kingdom is entirely spiritual rather than physical. However, for at least *three* reasons, Jesus did not here deny the one day future arrival of an earthly kingdom. *First*, Christ made this statement very late in His ministry. By this time, the offer of the kingdom that had been extended to first-century Israel (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:5-7) had already been rejected (Matt. 12:24) and taken off the table (Matt. 21:43). Thus, in John 18:36, at that specific point in time, Christ was simply explaining that God's kingdom was no longer an imminent threat to Pilate's kingdom. Constable notes the specific timing of Christ's remarks:

Jesus was not denying that His kingdom was an earthly kingdom. He was not saying it was only the spiritual rule of God over the hearts of His people. He was not saying that His kingdom had nothing to do with this world, either. This should be clear from Jesus' other references to His

kingdom as being an earthly kingdom. His point was that He and His kingdom were not a present threat to Rome (cf. 18:10-11). It was non-threatening because God had postponed the messianic kingdom—due to Israel's unbelief—though Jesus did not explain this to Pilate.³

Second, the final clause of John 18:36 contains the Greek word *nyn*, which is typically translated "now." This final clause could therefore be translated, "but *now* My kingdom is not from here" (NKJV; italics added). Thus, the idea is "My kingdom is not *now* established." In other words, Christ was not denying the kingdom's ultimate arrival upon earth. Rather, he was only denying its immediate arrival. Craven explains the significance of the insertion of "now":

In this utterance, it is contended that our Lord intended to declare to Pilate that the kingdom He came to establish was not after the manner of the kingdoms of this world, *i. e.*, not external, political. It is admitted that the utterance considered in itself will bear this interpretation; but it will also bear one consistent with the theory herein advocated, especially in view of the introduction of *nyn* in the last clause of the verse, which may be regarded as a particle of time—My kingdom is not *now* established. Which of these interpretations are we to adopt? The one supposes that our Lord whispered into the ear of a heathen (neither the disciples nor the Jews were in the Pretorium, ver. 28), the great truth concerning His kingdom, which he had not only *concealed* from His disciples (hid from them in a bewildering enigma) but a few hours before on the solemn occasion of the institution of the Supper, Luke 22:29, 30; but which, also, He continued to *conceal* throughout the forty days of His subsequent continuance with them, during which time He is represented as "speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God," Acts 1:3, and as opening "their understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures," Luke 24:45! The other interpretation supposes that He spoke in consistency with His previous and subsequent teaching.⁴

Third, rather than denying its future, terrestrial reality, Christ was here simply making a statement as to the His kingdom's ultimate origin or source. When Christ explained "My kingdom is not *of* this world" (italics added), the word translated "of" is the Greek preposition *ek*. McClain notes its significance: "The preposition is *ek*, indicating source or originating cause. His kingdom does not originate in the present cosmos or world system."⁵ Constable similarly

explains, "Jesus' kingdom is 'not of this realm' or 'from another place' (Gr. *ouk enteuthen*, lit. not from this place) in another sense. It will come down from heaven to the earth rather than originating from the earth. It will begin when Jesus comes down from heaven to earth at His Second Coming."⁶

Because the kingdom ultimately originates from heaven, it is referred to as “the kingdom of heaven” by John (Matt. 3:1-2), Christ (Matt. 4:17), and the Twelve (Matt. 10:5-7). It is also called “the kingdom of heaven” since the kingdom will be inaugurated by the “God of heaven.” Notice how Daniel connects this “God of heaven” with His coming kingdom: “In the days of those kings the *God of heaven* will set up a *kingdom* which will never be destroyed...” (Dan. 2:44; italics added). In sum, rather than teaching that His kingdom is spiritual only, in John 18:36, Christ simply explains that the future kingdom, which will one day come to the earth, ultimately originated from or is sourced in heaven.

(To Be Continued...)

¹ See Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Messianic Jewish Epistles*, Ariel's Bible Commentary (Tustin, CA: Ariel, 2005), 318-21. This issue will be given greater treatment later on in the series.

² Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 295-97.

³ Thomas Constable, “Notes on John,” online: www.soniclight.com, accessed 5 February 2014, 294.

⁴ E.R. Craven, "Excursus on the Basileia," in *Revelation of John*, ed. Lange (New York: Scribner, 1874), 100.

⁵ McClain, *Greatness of the Kingdom*, 381.

⁶ Constable, “Notes on John,” 294.