

THE COMING KINGDOM, PART XXXIV

by Andy Woods

We began scrutinizing New Testament texts that "kingdom now" theologians employ in an attempt to argue that the kingdom is a present reality in order to show that none of these passages teach a present form of the kingdom. We have examined the typical texts from the Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, and the general epistles used by "kingdom now" theologians. In this installment, we will take a similar look at common "kingdom now" proof texts allegedly found in the Book of Revelation.

A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS?

A text commonly used by "kingdom now" theologians is Revelation 1:5-6, which says that Christ has made believers into a kingdom of priests. These verses say, "And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood; and He has made us *to be* a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him *be* the glory and the dominion forever and ever." The logic of the argument from the "kingdom now" theologian here is that if we indeed are a kingdom of priests then we must now be in the present spiritual Messianic kingdom. However, such an interpretive approach is to reveal impatience with interpreting the Apocalypse. This is especially true since the Book of Revelation typically interprets itself either in the very same or in a subsequent context. One example is how the dragon (Rev. 12:3) is later interpreted as the serpent or the devil in both in the immediate (Rev. 12:9) and the extended (Rev. 20:2) contexts of the same book. In fact, Walvoord, in his Revelation commentary, identifies twenty-six instances where an interpretation is conspicuously provided in the immediate context.¹

Thus, the explanation of Revelation 1:6 is found later in Revelation 5:10, which says, “And thou hast made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they *will reign upon the earth*” (italics added). Notice that Revelation 5:10 explains when and where the Church will exercise its authority as a kingdom of priests. We know that this reign will take place in the future given the future tense of the verb *basileuō*, which is translated “they will reign.” In other words, the reign is not now but future. We also know from the final clause in Revelation 5:10 that this reign will take place upon the earth. Thus, the explanation of Revelation 1:6 is found in Revelation 5:10, which anticipates a future, earthly reign rather than the present reign of believers. In other words, putting both Revelation 1:6 and 5:10 together reveals that although believers are a present kingdom of priests, they will not actually reign in this capacity until the future earthly Messianic kingdom is established. Toussaint summarizes, “The explanation of this verse is found in 5:10 (NASB), which anticipates the future reign of believers with Christ.”²

FELLOW PARTAKER IN THE KINGDOM?

Another text used by “kingdom now” theologians is Revelation 1:9, “I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance *which are* in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” “Kingdom now” theologians believe that this text indicates that because John describes himself to his audience as a fellow partaker in the kingdom, then the kingdom must be a present spiritual reality. Yet, this represents another case where it would be better to allow the Book of Revelation to interpret itself. Other sections of the Apocalypse describe the kingdom as both future and earthly (Rev. 5:10; 11:15; 20:1-10). Thus, Revelation 1:9 is speaking of the future millennial reign of Christ. In fact, commentators seem nearly unanimous in interpreting the Greek word

basileia, translated "kingdom" in Revelation 1:9, as the future Millennium. Thomas observes, "Little difference of opinion exists over the meaning of *basileia* in 1:9. It is the millennial kingdom described more fully in Revelation 20."³

JESUS HAS ALREADY OVERCOME?

Other "kingdom now" theologians appeal to Revelation 5:5 in order to contend for a present, spiritual kingdom. This verse says, "and one of the elders said to me, 'Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals.'" Because the verb translated "has overcome" is in the aorist tense, Bock observes:

The victory, or at least the decisive act, has already occurred. He is qualified to open the scrolls and the seals because of what he has already done as a Davidite...The timing of Revelation 5:5 is critical, since it precedes the seal judgments and the second coming, so the text shows Jesus has his regal victorious status before he returns in Revelation 19. The portrait of these Revelation texts is consistent. Jesus now rules in spiritual-salvific terms, in a new community that is part of the kingdom program, and in a way that inaugurates Davidic promises. That kingdom exists alongside the kingdoms of earth...⁴

Yet, neither the word "kingdom" (*basileia*) nor its verbal form "to reign" (*basileuō*) are used in Revelation 5:5. Surely, this word group would be employed by John here had it been his intention to communicate that the kingdom is a present, spiritual reality. Rather, all this verse really communicates is that Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, has already broken into history through His First Advent and laid the ground work for the eventual establishment of His kingdom through His redemptive death. Regarding Bock's use of Revelation 5:5, Toussaint observes, "But this does not prove a present spiritual form of the kingdom. Christ's death and

resurrection have defeated Satan but the kingdom is clearly future; this is especially seen in the Apocalypse"⁵ (Rev. 5:10; 11:15; 20:1-10).

Perhaps an analogy from the modern legal world can help to elucidate the true meaning of Revelation 5:5. When someone is charged with a crime, there are typically two phases of the trial. In the first phase, the accused is tried by a jury of his peers. If found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, at this point the accused becomes a convict. In the second phase of the trial, the convict later appears before the judge for sentencing. In the same way, Satan has already been convicted at the cross (John 12:31; 16:11; Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14; 1 John 3:8). In this sense, he is a defeated foe. If true, then what are we to make of the numerous passages indicating that he is still the ruler of this present world (2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2; 1 Pet. 5:8; 1 John 4:4; 5:19)? The reason for these descriptors is that his sentence has not yet been imposed. Such an imposition of his punishment will not take place until the events surrounding the establishment of the kingdom (Rev. 12:9-10; 20:2-3, 10). Thus, while Revelation 5:5 describes Christ's victory at the trial's guilt phase, it is not speaking of the penalty phase of the trial, which will be accomplished in the events surrounding the establishment of the future millennial kingdom. In other words, while Christ's victory at the conviction stage has already transpired (Rev. 5:5), His victory at the sentencing stage awaits the future arrival of the kingdom (Rev. 12:9-10; 20:2-3, 10).

THE CONTEXT: REVELATION 2–3

Moreover, the notion of interpreting any of these above texts from the Apocalypse (Rev. 1:6, 9; 5:5) as conveying a reigning church in the present hardly fits the immediate context of the Book of Revelation. As mentioned earlier in this series,⁶ if we are now in a spiritual form of the Davidic Kingdom, then the deplorable spiritual condition of the churches in Revelation 2–3 is

inexplicable. Five of these seven churches in Asia Minor are in an apostate condition. In fact, it appears as if most of these churches had so departed from Christ that they are no longer governed by Him. This very scenario had certainly transpired in the Laodicean church (Rev. 3:14-22) where Christ is depicted as standing outside the door of the church, knocking on the door, and seeking re-entry (Rev. 3:20). Laodicea represents a church that has so apostatized from the truth that Christ has been dethroned as the church's governing authority.

Evangelists often explain this verse in terms of Christ as standing outside the heart of the unbeliever, knocking on the heart, and inviting the unbeliever to become a Christian. This is not a correct representation of the verse's context. Rather, it represents Christ seeking fellowship with His own Church and people.⁷ Consequently, Christ is portrayed as standing outside the door of *His own church* seeking re-admittance as ruler of *His own people*. In fact, "Laodicea" means "ruled by the people." Newell observes, "The name comes from *laos*, people, and *dikao*, to rule: the rule of the people: 'democracy,' in other words."⁸ This sad spiritual reality hardly epitomizes a spiritual form of the kingdom where the church is depicted as presently reigning as a kingdom of priests or fellow partakers in the present kingdom or, where Christ has already gained the final victory by establishing His kingdom in the present.

(To Be Continued...)

¹ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 29-30. See also J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, trans., J. Otis Yoder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1961), 18-19.

² Stanley D. Toussaint, "Israel and the Church of a Traditional Dispensationalist," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 248.

³ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary*, ed. Kenneth Barker (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 87.

⁴ Darrell Bock, "The Reign of the Lord Christ," in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 64.

⁵ Toussaint, 248.

⁶ See part 25.

⁷ Dennis M. Rokser, *Seven Reasons Not to Ask Jesus into Your Heart: Answering the Question: "What Must I Do to Be Saved?"* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012).

⁸ William R. Newell, *The Book of the Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1935), 75. See also Thomas, 296.