

THE COMING KINGDOM, PART VIII

by Andy Woods

Because today's evangelical world believes that the church is experiencing the messianic kingdom, we began a study chronicling what the Bible teaches about the kingdom. This earthly kingdom is anticipated in the office of Theocratic Administrator that was lost in Eden, in the biblical covenants, in the predictions of the Old Testament prophets, and in the earthly theocracy governing Israel from the time of Moses to Zedekiah. This theocratic arrangement terminated with the initiation of the "Times of the Gentiles" when the nation had no king reigning on David's Throne as Judah was trampled by various Gentile powers. Against that backdrop entered Jesus Christ, the rightful Heir to David's Throne. Had first-century Israel enthroned Christ, the earthly kingdom would have become a reality. Despite this unprecedented opportunity, Israel rejected the kingdom offer (Matt. 12) leading to the kingdom's postponement. Due to this postponement, Christ began to explain the spiritual conditions that would prevail during the kingdom's absence. This interim program includes His revelation of the kingdom mysteries (Matt. 13) and the church (Matt. 16:18).

KINGDOM MYSTERIES

The kingdom mysteries represent the events to be experienced by the kingdom heirs or the "sons of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:38) between Israel's rejection of the kingdom and the re-offer of the kingdom to Israel in the future. Thus, the kingdom mysteries cover the time period between Israel's formal rejection of the kingdom and the Second Advent (13:40-42, 49-50). The kingdom mysteries represent new truths concerning the kingdom that were undisclosed in the Old Testament. Because these truths had never before been made known, they represent a mystery age or a period of time not revealed in prior Scripture (Matt. 13:11; Eph. 3:9; Rom.

16:25-26). When the parables of Matthew 13 are understood together, we gain a complete picture of the course of the present “mystery age.” As explained in the previous article, during this age, the gospel will be preached with mixed results (Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23). It will be difficult to distinguish between the saved and unsaved within professing Christendom (13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50). Also, Christendom will experience great expansion from a small beginning (13:31-32) and become increasingly apostate as the age progresses (13:33). Israel will remain in unbelief and unconverted until the age’s conclusion (13:44), and the Lord will gain a treasure from among the Gentiles (13:45-46).

While Christ revealed the kingdom mysteries in parabolic form, He did not give the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) or the missions discourse (10) in parabolic form. Why did Christ reveal the kingdom mysteries in parabolic form? In addition to fulfilling prophecy (13:34-35; Ps. 78:2), the parabolic form of teaching allowed Him to simultaneously conceal and reveal. Christ desired to conceal truth from the nation since they had already rejected the offer of the kingdom (Matt. 12). Such concealment was actually merciful since the disclosure of more truth would have brought first-century Israel into even greater condemnation. Earlier, Christ had explained that greater revelation brings forth greater accountability (11:20-24). The disclosure of more truth to the nation at this point would not have helped Israel but rather would have only increased her degree of discipline since she had already chosen to reject the kingdom offer. On the other hand, Christ wanted to reveal truth to the believing remnant to prepare them for their leadership roles (Eph. 2:20) in the soon to be birthed church. Because they were to be His earthly representatives throughout the mystery age, they needed full information concerning the spiritual characteristics of this new age.

MYSTERY FORM OF THE KINGDOM?

A mistake typically made even by dispensational, premillennial interpreters is to contend that the Matthew 13 parables reveal a present spiritual form of the kingdom known as the "mystery form of the kingdom." While not contending that the Davidic kingdom is present, they instead believe that the kingdom is spiritually present in mystery form only.¹ However, even this is to read too much into the text of Matthew 13 than is actually there. Toussaint notes:

It is often alleged that the Lord predicted a form of the kingdom for the Church age in His parables, particularly those in Matthew 13. For many years dispensationalists have referred to these parables as teaching a mystery form or a new form of the kingdom...However, nowhere in Matthew 13 or anywhere does the Lord Jesus use the term mystery form. Rather, He refers to the "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 11); that is, the Lord in these parables is giving to His disciples new truths about the kingdom that were hitherto unknown. It is strange that so many dispensationalists claim a new form of the kingdom is introduced in Matthew 13. Dispensationalists argue strenuously for a literal, earthly kingdom that is the fulfillment of the Old Testament when John, Jesus, and His disciples announced its nearness. Then suddenly these dispensationalists change the meaning in Matthew 13.²

McClain similarly observes:

The fiction of a present "kingdom of heaven" established on earth in the Church, has been lent some support by an incautious terminology sometimes used in defining the "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 13:11). The parables of this chapter, it is said carelessly by some, describe the kingdom of heaven as now existing in "mystery form" during the Church age. Now it is true that these parables present certain conditions related to the Kingdom which are contemporaneous with the present age. But nowhere in Matthew 13 is the establishment of the Kingdom placed within this age. On the contrary, in two of these parables the setting up of the Kingdom is definitely placed at the end of the "age" (vss. 39 and 49 ASV, with 41-43).³

¹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), 215-28.

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), 237.

³ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 440-41.

As these citations explain, there are at least four problems associated with equating the "kingdom mysteries" of Matthew 13 with a present spiritual form of the kingdom in "mystery form." First, although Christ uses the expression "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 11), Matthew 13, or any other place in Christ's teachings for that matter, fails to employ the expression "mystery form of the kingdom." These words must be read into the text. Second, the word "kingdom" or *basileia* must be interpreted inconsistently in Matthew's Gospel in order to justify the existence of a present mystery form of the kingdom. While premillennial dispensationalists interpret the word "kingdom" in reference to the future earthly reign of Christ in most of Matthew's uses of the word (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 6:10; 7:21; 8:11; 10:7; 24:14; 25:1, 34; 26:29), they inconsistently attach a spiritualized and allegorized meaning to the same word in Matthew 13.

Third, according to the revelation of the Times of the Gentiles as given to the prophet Daniel (Dan. 2; 7), the earthly theocracy terminated with the deposing of Zedekiah in 586 B.C. and will not return until the Second Advent (Matt. 25:31). As explained in an earlier article, during this period known as the Times of the Gentiles, Judah will be trampled down by various Gentile powers. Only after the final kingdom of man (the revived Roman Empire of the Antichrist) has been terminated by Christ, will God's kingdom be established on earth (Dan. 2:34-35; 43-45; 7:23-27). Thus, during the Times of the Gentiles, no spiritual form of the kingdom on earth is predicted by Daniel. This omission includes allusions to any spiritual form of the kingdom whatsoever, whether it be a spiritual form of the Davidic Kingdom, an "already but not yet" present manifestation of the Davidic Kingdom, a mystery form of the kingdom, or any other sophisticated vocabulary "kingdom now" theologians choose to employ. The lack of any reference to an earthly kingdom prior to Christ's Second Advent in Daniel's prophecies

should deter interpreters from finding a premature spiritual manifestation of the kingdom in the present Church Age. Unfortunately, those promoting a "mystery form of the kingdom" ignore this Danielic chronology by arguing for a present, spiritual form of the kingdom, despite the fact that the kingdoms of man have not yet run their course, the Antichrist and his kingdom have not yet been overthrown, and the Second Advent has not yet occurred.

Fourth, the whole "mystery form of the kingdom" idea seems to be more of the product of *eisegesis* (bringing to the biblical text what is not there) rather than *exegesis* (drawing out of the text what is naturally there). Since most dispensationalists adhere to a present mystery form of the kingdom, I too was taught this kingdom now theology early on. In fact, at one point, I even embraced this idea. However, I eventually became disillusioned with the concept after discovering its origin. The idea goes back to amillennialists (those who do not believe in a future earthly reign of Christ since the kingdom promises are being spiritually realized in the present age) accusing dispensationalists (those who believe that God has dealt with humanity through seven successive ages called dispensations) of dividing up the Bible to such an extent that the Scripture no longer contained a unifying and overarching theme. This charge upset dispensationalists to such a degree that they set out to find a unifying theme in the Bible. The theme that they settled upon was the kingdom. Thus, they sought to show the presence of the kingdom in every age or dispensation. This ambition, in turn, led them to conclude that the kingdom is present in mystery form only (Matt. 13:11). However, the hermeneutical danger associated with trying to make all of Scripture adhere to a predetermined theme, is that one ends up bringing a theology to the text rather than drawing a theology from the text. This explanation of the origin of the "mystery form of the kingdom" concept helps explain why so many source

the idea in Matthew 13 despite the fact that this theology is not borne out by a careful exegesis of this chapter.

(To Be Continued...)