

The Kingdom of the Heavens

In the previous two issues of *Affirmation & Critique* we examined the two great parables in Matthew 25, the parable of the ten virgins and the parable of the talents (see *Affirmation & Critique* V.3 (July 2000): 39-48; V.4 (October 2000): 41-47). The first parable begins, “At that time the kingdom of the heavens will be likened to ten virgins” (v. 1). The second begins, “For the kingdom of the heavens is just like a man about to go abroad” (v. 14). Both, therefore, are significant prophecies concerning the kingdom of the heavens. As we saw in previous issues, the Gospel of Matthew speaks of the “gospel of the kingdom” (4:23; 9:35; 24:14), the gospel of Christ as the King-Savior. In this article we shall begin to study the kingdom of the heavens as presented in this Gospel. As we shall see, the truth of the kingdom is a central component of the “word of righteousness” in the New Testament (Heb. 5:13), the truth concerning the believers’ responsibility and accountability to God for their life and service in the church age.

The Kingdom in God’s Purpose

And God said, Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of heaven and over the cattle and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth....And God blessed them; and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion. (Gen. 1:26, 28)

The two vital matters in the creation of man are the divine image and the divine authority. This means that man was to have the full image of God to express God, and he was to have the full authority to represent God and to subdue the entire earth, particularly including God’s enemy, signified by the creeping thing in verse 26. This divine authority is fulfilled by the divine kingdom, which is revealed throughout the entire Scriptures. The kingdom, therefore, is a sphere, a realm, for God to exercise His authority for the accomplishment of His purpose. The accomplishment of God’s eternal purpose depends on the kingdom (Lee, *Definition* 7-8). After the created race of Adam failed God in the matter of the kingdom, God chose the race of Abraham, the “great nation” spoken of in Genesis 12:2, as a kingdom. After God called Abraham, his descendants became the children of Israel as the kingdom

of God (Exo. 19:6), and in that nation God exercised His authority. Eventually, however, Israel failed God, and the kingdom was taken from them (Matt. 21:43).

The first preacher in the New Testament was John the Baptist, who began his ministry by proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near” (3:2). After him, the Lord Jesus began His preaching in the same way, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near” (4:17). The Gospels speak of the kingdom many times, and the Acts and the Epistles continue this line (Acts 14:22; 19:8; 28:31; Rom. 14:17; Col. 1:13; 1 Thes. 2:12; 2 Tim. 4:18; 2 Pet. 1:11). Eventually, Revelation 11:15 declares that, at the time of the Lord’s coming back, “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever.” In the millennium the Lord will rule as King with all His victorious saints (20:4, 6), and in eternity God will have a kingdom in which He will exercise His authority to the fullest extent as the accomplishment of His eternal purpose.

The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the Heavens

The Old Testament speaks of the kingdom of Israel, while the New Testament speaks first of the kingdom of the heavens and then of the millennial kingdom, the kingdom of one thousand years in the coming age, comprising the kingdom of the Father and the kingdom of the Son of Man. Hebrews 1:8 reaches to eternity to speak of the throne of the Son of God and the scepter of His kingdom, which are forever and ever. The encompassing name given by the Scriptures to all of these aspects is *the kingdom of God*. The kingdom of God is God’s reign in a general way, from eternity past to eternal future, over the entire universe by power and authority (Psa. 103:19; 145:11-13; 1 Chron. 29:11; Dan. 4:3, 34).

It comprises eternity without beginning before the foundation of the world, the chosen patriarchs (including the paradise of Adam), the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, the church in the New Testament, the coming millennial kingdom..., and the new heaven and new earth with the New Jerusalem in eternity without end. (Recovery Version, Matt. 5:3, note 4)

It is also God's reign in a particular way in the sense of the divine life (John 3:3, 5).

The basic thought of the Gospel of Matthew is that we must repent of not being in the kingdom and of not being under the kingship and authority of Christ. Whereas the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John speak concerning the kingdom of God, Matthew speaks mostly of the kingdom of the heavens. In fact, *the kingdom of the heavens* (βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν, the latter word in plural) is a term used exclusively by Matthew, who refers to it thirty-three times.¹ Since Matthew is a book on the kingdom, with Christ as the King, the Messiah, everything written in this book is related to the kingdom (2:2; 21:5; 27:11). Hence, we should take particular note of the kingdom of the heavens in this Gospel. We need to repent for the kingdom of the heavens (3:2; 4:17). The kingdom of the heavens belongs to those who are poor in spirit and who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness (5:3, 10), and those who live according to the new law, the heavenly principles, of the kingdom of the heavens are called great in it, while those who do not are called the least (v. 19). We must exercise and endeavor to enter into, deal properly with, and participate in the kingdom of the heavens (v. 20; 7:21; 18:1, 3-4; 19:12, 14, 23; 23:13), and in its manifestation the overcoming Gentile believers will feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (8:11). The disciples were commissioned to proclaim the kingdom of the heavens (10:7). The least in the kingdom of the heavens is greater than John the Baptist, and the kingdom of the heavens is taken by violence (11:11-12). The Lord unveiled the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens (13:11, 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52), and He gave to Peter its two keys to open it to the Jews and the Gentiles (16:19). Eventually, the Lord's return in the kingdom of the heavens will be like that of a king, a householder, and a bridegroom (18:23; 20:1; 22:2; 25:1, 14).

As we have said, the kingdom of God is God's reign in a general way, from eternity past to eternity future. The Scriptures show us that the kingdom of the heavens is a subset of the kingdom of God. When John the Baptist came, he told people to repent for the kingdom of the heavens had drawn near, and at the beginning of His earthly ministry the Lord made the same proclamation (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). This meant that up until that time, the kingdom of the heavens had not yet come but had only drawn near. Similarly, the Lord sent the first group of disciples to proclaim that "the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near" (10:7). On the one hand, the kingdom of God was already among the children of Israel, but on the other hand, the kingdom of the heavens was coming. In 11:11 the Lord said, "Truly I say to you, Among those born of women there has not arisen one greater than John the Baptist, yet he who is least in the kingdom of

the heavens is greater than he." If the least in the kingdom of the heavens was greater than John, it follows that John himself was not in the kingdom of the heavens, although clearly he was in the kingdom of God. Moreover, in 16:19 the Lord gave to Peter the keys of the kingdom of the heavens. Even at the time of Matthew 16 the kingdom of the heavens had not begun because the keys to it had not been given. As we will see, the distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the heavens is a very significant one, especially with a view to the word of righteousness in the New Testament.

Schools of Thought concerning the Kingdom

Given the complexities of the kingdom, it is no surprise that the scriptural truths of the kingdom in its various aspects have been subject to many, diverse, and various interpretations and applications. To enter into a comprehensive review of the theology of the kingdom is to take a step so bold as to be disproportionate to the purpose and capacity of this article. We shall, however, briefly review the most influential teachings concerning the kingdom that have been held, or developed, in the past few centuries.

Given the complexities of the kingdom, it is no surprise that the scriptural truths of the kingdom in its various aspects have been subject to many, diverse, and various interpretations and applications.

Concerning the kingdom as a coming age, the early church fathers primarily maintained the premillennial view, that is, that Christ's second coming would take place before and usher in His outward rule on the earth for a period of one thousand years (Rev. 20:4-6). Augustine abandoned this belief and set forth a symbolic interpretation of the millennial kingdom. The first resurrection mentioned in verse 5, he taught, takes place in the believers when "a transition from death to life is made in this present time"; then "from the first coming of Christ to the end of the world, when He shall come the second time," the saints, alive or martyred, reign with Christ in a figurative thousand years, "His present kingdom, the Church." Therefore, "the Church even now is the kingdom of Christ, and the kingdom of heaven," and there is no need for a separate age of a literal one thousand years (Oates 516-524). This non-literal, mystical view of the kingdom and the millennium was held throughout subsequent centuries and was embraced even by leaders of the Reformation.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the development

of postmillennialism, the expectation of an outward kingdom of God on the earth in the present age, prior to Christ's second coming, brought about by the renewal of men's hearts and reason through the outpouring of the Spirit. Jonathan Edwards, a leading commentator of this school, saw the revivals of the Great Awakening as a precursor of the new kingdom age. He expected that as sound doctrine prevailed more and more, the gospel was preached in new lands, and the power and sphere of the papacy was reduced, a golden age of spiritual prosperity would be brought in as the fulfillment of the coming of the kingdom, after which Christ would come to establish His kingdom in perfection and in full. The postmillennial view of the kingdom suffered greatly in the twentieth century as the two world wars made it plain to everyone that an outward kingdom of God on the earth was very far from realization. The scriptural basis of postmillennialism is not strong, and we shall say nothing more about it at this time.

In sharp contrast to postmillennialism, the dominant school of thought concerning the kingdom is that of the Brethren teachers, originating with J. N. Darby in the 1830s and most effectively propagated by C. I. Scofield in *The Scofield Reference Bible*, first published in 1909. The Brethren teachers accepted the ancient premillennial view of the kingdom, but they encased it within the larger governing theme of dispensationalism. Since these teachers were very well practiced in cutting straight (or, rightly dividing) the word of the truth (2 Tim. 2:15), we shall spend much more time here. Darby distinguishes the kingdom of God from the kingdom of the heavens, somewhat as we have above. He says,

The expression "kingdom of heaven"...is often, in a general sense, capable of being interchanged with "kingdom of God," as we see by comparing [Matthew with] Luke. Notwithstanding, the two phrases cannot always replace each other, and Matthew uses "kingdom of God" in a few passages where "kingdom of heaven" could not be used. (25: 47)

He compares the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the heavens to the physical subdivision of Geneva and the political entity of Geneva. Only in a broad sense can the two be said to be the same:

In some places this is true; just as the canton and the republic of Geneva are now the same thing. But if I were to try and identify the canton and the republic in history, I should only shew my ignorance....Although the kingdom of heaven is necessarily the kingdom of God, the expression "kingdom of heaven" relates to an order of things in the dispensations of God. (1: 285)

Although Darby is accurate in drawing a distinction, it is

his strictly dispensational view of the kingdom that we must disagree with. His "order of things" is as follows:

The kingdom of God was there in the Person of Christ, the King. Only as He was on earth, it was not the kingdom of heaven. But Christ being rejected, He could not take it [the kingdom] outwardly then, but ascended on high. Thus the sphere of the rule of Christ is in heaven. The heavens rule, and the kingdom is always the kingdom of heaven, because the King is in heaven. (11: 281)

The kingdom of God was necessarily there [among men] when the Son of God was there—in a word, when God was there. The kingdom of heaven, as the development of God's *purpose*, could not be there while He was there; it resulted from the Lord's going away into heaven....The kingdom of heaven is the kingdom of God in its heavenly character. In *dispensation* this is set up by *the rejection of the King of God's kingdom by the world.*"...The kingdom of heaven...was set up, continuing, as regards the Church, till the time when the saints, in the Father's kingdom, raised with Jesus at His second coming, shall know the blessedness of the rule of the Son of God and man, in the whole scene which once rejected Him, now brought under His sway and theirs. (2: 54-55)

The kingdom is, Darby says, where Christ is. While Christ was on the earth, the kingdom of God was there but not the kingdom of the heavens, for "it was not the kingdom of heaven whilst the King was upon earth" (1: 285). Furthermore, after the Lord's ascension to heaven, the kingdom followed Him there, where it will be with its "heavenly character" until His return, with the kingdom, to earth. This time of the Lord's coming with the rule of God and of the saints is the time spoken of in Daniel 7:14. Therefore, Darby says, in this present age, the church age, the kingdom on earth is "postponed" and "in abeyance" (30: 95, 97), for this is not the time of God's reign on the earth. Darby does allow, however, that the believers are "in another sense...in the kingdom now" (25: 48), although only in a sense, for the practicing sovereign on the earth at the present time is not God but Satan, the ruler of this world.

Using the parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13, Darby draws another strong conclusion concerning the kingdom of the heavens. In this chapter the Lord presents seven parables (excluding His final word in verse 52) concerning the mysteries of the kingdom. In contrast to what He said in the latter six parables, at the beginning of the first parable the Lord did not say, "The kingdom of the heavens is (or, has become) like..." for the sowing of the seed is only the preliminary work of the kingdom. The kingdom of the heavens begins with the second parable. From the second to the fourth parable, Darby notes the tares (vv. 24-30), the great tree (vv. 31-32), and the leaven

(v. 33)—signifying respectively the false believers and the abnormal development and the inward corruption of the outward appearance of the kingdom—all said to be components of the kingdom of the heavens.² To be sure, these great negative elements are not of the church, the Body of Christ, in its pure, spiritual, and holy nature. Therefore, Darby concludes that the kingdom of the heavens is not “the true invisible church of God,” because of its obviously negative elements, nor is it “merely the visible church of God” (2: 56), in view of its distinctly precious elements revealed in the fifth and sixth parables in verses 44 through 46. As a consequence then of his purely dispensational view in his reading of Matthew 13, Darby insists strongly that the church, in its unadulterated sense, cannot be equated in any way with the kingdom of the heavens. He says, “The church has no relation nor any contact with the kingdom, save that it exists down here in the field, over which the authority of the kingdom is exercised. Later on, the church will reign with the Lord over the same field” (1: 286).

He is very strong on this point, saying that to associate the church with the kingdom of the heavens is “perfectly absurd,” a “very mischievous confusion,” and a “very serious mistake” (11: 283; 15: 351; 24: 160).

The ramifications of a purely dispensational, distanced view of the kingdom of the heavens, however, compromise both our understanding of the Scriptures and our response to them in a diligent living before the Lord. We shall first try to situate the kingdom of the heavens in the dispensational scheme of God’s economy. As we have said, the kingdom of God is God’s general reign from eternity past to eternity future, while the kingdom of the heavens is a specific section within the kingdom of God, a section composed only of the church today and the heavenly part of the coming millennial kingdom. In the Old Testament the kingdom of God, generally, already existed with the nation of Israel. In Matthew 21:43 the Lord told the chief priests and elders, “Therefore I say to you that the kingdom of God shall be taken from you and shall be given to a nation producing its fruit.” This indicates that the kingdom of God was already there among the Israelites, but the kingdom of the heavens, specifically, had still not come; it had only drawn near when John the Baptist came.

Matthew 13 prophesies through parables the coming of the kingdom of the heavens. After the preliminary, preparatory work of the kingdom in the first parable, the second parable begins with, “The kingdom of the heavens has become like...” (v. 24). This indicates that the kingdom of the heavens began to be established when this parable began to be fulfilled. The tares spoken of here, as we know, signify the false believers who were sown among the true believers, the wheat. This parable began to be fulfilled on

the day of Pentecost, when the church was founded. From this time on, the tares formed what we may call the appearance (not the reality) of the kingdom of the heavens, which we may comprehensively refer to as Christendom. In this we concur with Darby, who says, “The kingdom of heaven in mystery takes in all Christendom, professors as well as true Christians” (30: 97). We may think of a great circle, labeled “The appearance of the kingdom of the heavens—Christendom” within which is a smaller circle, labeled “The reality of the kingdom of the heavens—the church—in the dispensation of grace.”³ Since the church in this age is the genuine article existing among and within a false appearance, it cannot be that the church “has no relation nor any contact with the kingdom.” We may apply this same principle to the third and fourth parables in Matthew 13; both the abnormal development of Christendom and the leavened teachings in it are elements of the appearance of the kingdom of the heavens, though not of its reality. If we understand the kingdom of the heavens in this way, there is no need, as there is no profit, to divorce the church from the kingdom of the heavens. Indeed, the understanding of the reality and the appearance of the kingdom is not far from what Darby proposes in speaking

The ramifications of a purely dispensational, distanced view of the kingdom of the heavens, however, compromise our understanding of the Scriptures and our response to them in a diligent living before the Lord.

of the negative “external character” of the kingdom and its precious “internal character in God’s sight” (2: 63).

Although the evangelical G. E. Ladd writes plainly, “The kingdom is not the church,” he proceeds to place the kingdom and the church so closely together so as to, for practical purposes, make the distinction negligible. We contrast his “inseparable relationship” with Darby’s “no relation”:

There is an inseparable relationship. The church is the fellowship of men who have accepted his [Christ’s] offer of the kingdom, submitted to its rule, and entered into its blessings...Thus we may say that the kingdom of God creates the church. The redemptive rule of God brings into being a new people who receive the blessings of the divine reign...The kingdom also works through the church. The disciples preached the kingdom of God and performed signs of the kingdom (Matt. 10:7-8; Luke 10:9, 17). The powers of the kingdom were operative in and through them. Jesus said that he would give to the

church the keys of the kingdom of heaven with power to bind and loose (Matt. 16:18-19)...These keys, along with the kingdom blessings, are to be given to the new people who, as they preach the good news of the kingdom, will be the means of binding or loosing men from their sins. In fact, the disciples had already used these keys and exercised this authority, bringing men the gift of peace or pronouncing the divine judgment (Matt. 10:13-15). The kingdom is God's deed. It has come into the world in Christ; it works in the world through the church. (611)

Darby notes that the kingdom exists only where Christ the King is. To be sure, this is the case. The kingdom has no existence apart from Christ. We cannot say, however, that the kingdom of the heavens exists only in the third heavens, where the ascended Christ is. The New Testament plainly tells us that in resurrection Christ became the life-giving Spirit, and on the evening of the day of His resurrection the Lord appeared to His disciples and breathed into them, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45; John 20:22). Today the Lord, who is the Spirit, is with our human spirit (2 Cor. 3:17; Rom. 8:16; 2 Tim. 4:22). Thus, the resurrected and ascended Christ today is the pneumatic Christ who dwells in His believers (2 Cor. 13:5; Gal. 2:20). Since Christ is in the believers, the kingdom of the heavens, the kingdom today in its heavenly characteristic, is with the believers and in the believers. As such, it has never been nor can ever be suspended, postponed, or in abeyance.

According to the dispensational model of the kingdom, this is not the time of God's reign on the earth. Indeed, the world today is under the ruler of this world, Satan, who has it in his power to give all the kingdoms of this world to the one who worships him (Matt. 4:8-9). It is clear that God's authority and rule in full with power will begin not in this age but in the coming age and will extend into eternity future. However, we the believers are not the world; we are the church. Therefore, it is a serious flaw in the dispensational teaching of the kingdom to assert that Christ does not exercise His kingship in the church today. "Christ is never called the King of the church," says Darby; "We find nothing in the word to bear out the thought that Christ exercises royal authority over the church, and the teaching in Matthew 13 renders this distinction important...Instead of His reigning over the church, the church will reign with Him" (1: 286; 30: 97). Although it is true that the believers will one day reign with Christ, it is also true that the Christ in Matthew, the King-Savior, sets up the kingdom of the heavens over us and within us today. This Christ, who entered into our spirit through regeneration, is the King with the kingdom. Before we were saved, we did not have a king. But after we turned to the Lord, He became our King. Now we are under the rule of this King. With

the King there is the kingship, and this kingship is the kingdom. Today we are in the kingdom of this King, that is, in the kingdom of the heavens. When Christ came into our spirit, the kingdom arrived with Him. Now in our spirit we have not only the Savior but the King with the kingdom. Thus, to say that the Lord is with our spirit (2 Tim. 4:22) means that the kingdom is with our spirit. What a mistake it is to defer the kingdom to a dispensation or to the distant heavens!

Just as Christ will take His kingdom in full over the whole earth in the coming age, He rules as Sovereign in the church today. Romans 5:17 tells us that "those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ." The life we receive does not merely save us from a few things; rather, it enthrones us as kings to reign over all things, especially Satan, sin, death, and the flesh in our fallen being. In fact, if Christ does not rule over us today, how can we be qualified to rule with Him at His coming? The kingdom of the heavens, therefore, is within us today. It is Christ Himself ruling in His believers, the church, His Body, and it is the believers reigning in Him, that is, in His life, subjectively over the negative things of the fall, mainly within our own being. Witness Lee says with characteristic succinctness:

When the Lord Jesus came with the kingdom of the heavens, He was rejected by the Jewish people, so He turned to the Gentiles and established His church among the Gentiles. Within the church He brought all things under the rule and government of the heavens. In the church there is the heavenly rule and government, and there is the reality of the kingdom of the heavens. During the period of the church age, however, the kingdom of the heavens, the heavenly rule, is not manifested in an open way. Rather, it is a heavenly rule in a very mysterious and hidden way. (*Definition 29-30*)

Romans 14:17 says, "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." This verse speaks of the kingdom at the present time, using *is* (ἔστιν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ) in the present tense. This verse is a strong proof that the church in the church age is the kingdom, because the context of Romans 14 deals with the practice of the church life at the present time. In the period between His resurrection and His ascension, the Lord appeared to the disciples and spoke the things concerning the kingdom. This proves that the kingdom of God would be the main subject of the apostles' preaching in their commission that was to come after Pentecost (Acts 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). It is not a material kingdom visible to human sight (cf. the kingdom of Israel, 1:6) but a kingdom of the divine life. It is the spreading of Christ as life to His believers to form a realm in which God rules in His life. In the Epistles, Paul taught that the kingdom of

God is not in speech but in power, implying that in the sense of authority the church in this age is the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 4:20). The Father has “delivered us out of the authority of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son of His love” (Col. 1:13). *Transferred* (μετέστησεν, aorist) indicates that the believers are at the present time in the kingdom of God and Christ (1 Thes. 2:12), the sphere in which they can worship and enjoy God under the divine ruling. Near the end of the first century of the church age, the apostle John declared that he was a “fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and endurance in Jesus” (Rev. 1:9). Alford notes that the placement of *kingdom* between, not after, *tribulation* and *endurance* is “startling” (4: 553), but Lenski finds more meaning, with which we agree:

Strange combination! Yet not strange. When the affliction sets in, the kingdom produces the endurance. Even the order of the three words is illuminating. Were it not for the kingdom, which the world opposes, there would be no affliction for the partakers of the kingdom; were it not for the powers of the kingdom, its partakers could not endure. In v. 6 we hear that Christ “made us a kingdom,” hence we should not think that the kingdom lies entirely in the future. Here the thought is our common lot in the kingdom, the rule of Christ’s grace and power. Our very affliction shows that his grace has been active in us, our endurance also shows this. We are the kingdom, in it, partakers of it, lifted to royalty in it—these are only variant expressions for our connection with the King and his rule of grace. (*Revelation* 55)

By the above we can see that the church and the kingdom are two aspects of the same entity. The church is a matter of grace and life, whereas the kingdom is a matter of exercise and discipline. On the one hand, the church is a family in which we enjoy grace and experience life. On the other hand, the church is the kingdom in which the believers undergo a certain amount of exercise to have the Lord’s leadership and rule under His headship. Thus, the kingdom of God is the exercise of the church life today. The church life is for the kingdom life, and the kingdom life is an exercise of the Christian life. Therefore, we take exception to the teaching of dispensationalism that says the church “has no relation nor any contact with the kingdom.” Christ indeed exercises “royal authority over the church,” the believers, who in turn reign in life in Him at the present time. The life revealed in Romans 14 is a life in the genuine church today, under God’s rule and authority in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens in the present age.

A flawed interpretation concerning the kingdom of the heavens is embodied in the writings of many contemporary teachers. With an understanding that the divine revelation is progressive and cumulative, we should expect

this latter school of thought to build upon the truths released in the preceding centuries. Indeed, they do, but the building is not worthy of the foundation. Rather, we see a shameful decline in the accuracy, enlightenment, expectation, and even moral result of the modern teaching. Many today conveniently propound that the kingdom of the heavens is simply heaven itself, the third heaven where God and His angels are and to which, as is incorrectly taught, the believers are carried after their death. MacArthur quotes from Thomas Boston’s “classic work,” which characterizes the popular expectation of a kingdom of unsurpassed glories and pleasures in heaven:

A kingdom is the height of worldly felicity; there is nothing on earth greater than a kingdom. Therefore the hidden weight of the glory in heaven is held forth to us under that notion. But it is not an ordinary kingdom, it is “the kingdom;” the kingdom of heaven, surpassing all the kingdoms of the earth in glory, honor, profit, and pleasure—ininitely more than they excel the low and inglorious condition of a beggar in rags, and on a dunghill. (196)

Many today conveniently propound that the kingdom of the heavens is simply heaven itself, the third heaven where God and His angels are and to which, as is incorrectly taught, the believers are carried after their death.

Such a hope for a deferred kingdom of glory and pleasure does not take into account the central and crucial parables of Matthew 13, as Darby so strongly stressed. Those parables tell us that “the kingdom of the heavens is (or, has become) like” tares, a great tree, and leaven (vv. 24-35), which certainly cannot be found in the heaven for which many believers wait. We expect that the truth in the Scriptures as well as the leavened teachings concerning heaven have been adequately laid out in a prior issue of this journal (*Affirmation & Critique* V.2, April 2000), which we most strongly commend to the reader.⁴

The Reality of the Kingdom of the Heavens

According to Matthew, there are three aspects concerning the kingdom of the heavens: the reality, the appearance, and the manifestation. The reality of the kingdom of the heavens is the inward content of the kingdom of the heavens in its heavenly and spiritual nature, as revealed by the new King on the mountain in Matthew 5 through 7. The appearance of the kingdom of the heavens is the outward

state of the kingdom of the heavens in name, that is, Christendom, as revealed by the King on the seashore in chapter thirteen. The manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens is the practical coming of the kingdom of the heavens in power, as unveiled by the King on the Mount of Olives in Matthew 24 and 25. Both the reality and the appearance of the kingdom of the heavens are with the church today and began on the day of Pentecost (Recovery Version, Matt. 5:3, note 4). Outside the church is the external appearance of the kingdom of the heavens, known as Christendom, while within Christendom is the true church, which is the composition of the real believers. God's intention is to have the earth controlled by the heavens; thus, His heavenly reign must descend to the earth to be the authority over the earth. This authority begins today in the church with those who pay the price to be in the reality of the kingdom.

The parables in Matthew 13 reveal certain evil matters, such as false believers and leavened teachings. In Matthew 5, 6, and 7, though, the kingdom of the heavens is revealed as something very pure. The Lord's word on the mountain may be considered the constitution of the kingdom of the heavens. It is a revelation of the spiritual living and heavenly principles of the kingdom of the heavens. It is composed of seven sections.⁵ The first section depicts the nature of the people, who comprise the kingdom in the current age, under nine blessings (5:1-12). Verse 3 says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of the heavens." To be poor in spirit is not only to be humble but also to be emptied in our spirit, in the depth of our being, not holding on to the old things but unloaded to receive the new things of the kingdom of the heavens. *Spirit* here refers not to the Spirit of God but to our human spirit, the deepest part of our being, the organ by which we contact God and realize spiritual things. We need to be poor, emptied, unloaded, in this part of our being that we may realize and possess the kingdom of the heavens both at the present time and in the future. Verse 10 says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of the heavens." This indicates that we need to pay a price for the righteousness that we seek. If we seek for righteousness at a cost, the kingdom of the heavens becomes ours; we are in its reality now, and we shall be rewarded with its manifestation in the coming age.

After touching the inward being of the kingdom people, the Lord spoke concerning the influence of the kingdom people upon the world (vv. 13-16). To the corrupted earth the people of the kingdom of the heavens are salt to kill and eliminate the germs of corruption. To the darkened world the kingdom people are light, effacing the world's darkness. As such they are a lamp shining inwardly and a city situated on a mountain. This will ultimately consummate in the holy city, the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:10-11,

23-24). The third section of the constitution of the kingdom of the heavens is the law of the kingdom people (Matt. 5:17-48). Christ fulfilled the law, on the positive side, by keeping it and, on the negative side, by fulfilling its requirement through His substitutionary death on the cross. Moreover, in this portion of the Word He complemented the old law with His new law, as repeatedly expressed by the word, "But I say to (or, tell) you" (vv. 22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44). The new law of the kingdom, which the people of the kingdom fulfill by the Lord's resurrection life, maintains a higher standard than the old law. The old law commanded us not to murder, but according to the law of the kingdom of the heavens, we are forbidden to be angry with our brothers. In addition, the old law forbade the committing of adultery, but the new law forbids looking at a woman to lust after her. To this end the people of the kingdom must deal severely with sin and consider it in relation to the kingdom of the heavens (vv. 29-30).

The fourth section of the constitution of the kingdom of the heavens concerns the righteous deeds of the kingdom people, such as giving alms and praying (6:1-18). Man's flesh, seeking to glorify itself, always wants to do good deeds before men in order to gain men's praise. But the kingdom people, who live in an emptied and humbled spirit and walk in a pure and single heart under the heavenly ruling of the kingdom, are not allowed to do anything in the flesh to gain the praise of men, but must do all things in the spirit to please their heavenly Father. What they do in their spirit under the heavenly rule to please solely their Father must not be interfered with by their flesh in its lusting for man's glory. The fifth section of the Lord's word here concerns the dealing of the kingdom people with material riches (vv. 19-34). They are to store up for themselves not treasures on the earth but treasures in heaven. This is to give material things to the poor and to care for the needy saints and the Lord's servants. They must serve God and not mammon with a single eye; they must not be anxious; they must seek first the Father's kingdom—the reality of the kingdom of the heavens today, the reality of the church life today, and the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens in the coming age—and they must seek the Father's righteousness, the righteousness expressed by the keeping of the new law of the kingdom.

The constitution of the kingdom of the heavens also comprises the principles of the kingdom people in dealing with others (7:1-12). The kingdom people, living in a humble spirit under the heavenly ruling of the kingdom, must judge themselves and not others in the consideration of their own judgment by the Lord at His judgment seat in the future, and they must care for the condition and capacity of those to whom they speak. To this end, they must look to the heavenly Father by asking, seeking, and knocking in

increasing degrees of prayer. Lastly, the seventh section of the constitution of the kingdom of the heavens speaks of the ground of the kingdom people's living and work (vv. 13-29). The kingdom people must enter in through the narrow gate and walk upon the constricted way. The gate is narrow and the way is constricted because the new law of the kingdom is stricter and the demand of the kingdom higher than the law and the demand of the old covenant. The narrow gate deals not only with outward conduct but also with inward motive. The old man, the self, the flesh, the human concept, and the world with its glory are all excluded; only that which corresponds with God's will can enter in. The kingdom people need first to enter in through such a narrow gate, and then to walk on such a constricted way. They must also do the will of the Father with a view to entering into the kingdom of the heavens, and they must build not upon sand, signifying human concepts and natural ways, but upon the solid rock, the wise word of Christ that reveals the will of His Father who is in the heavens, knowing that their living and work will be tested both from above by God (the "rain") and from below by man and Satan ("rivers" and "winds").

The basic concept of the constitution of the kingdom of the heavens is that the kingdom people should be righteously strict with themselves, mercifully kind toward others, and secretly pure toward God. Such a life, as revealed in Matthew 5 through 7, is summarized in Romans 14:17, which says, "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Witness Lee expositis:

Righteousness denotes that which is right and proper. Those who live in the kingdom of God should be right and proper toward others, toward things, and toward God; with them there should be nothing erroneous, improper, crooked, slanted, or biased. This requires that they be strict in dealing with themselves. Peace is the fruit of righteousness....It characterizes the relationship that those who live in the kingdom of God should have with others and with God. If we are righteous, right, and proper toward others, toward things, and toward God, we will have a peaceful relationship with others and with God. Thus, we will have joy in the Holy Spirit and, in particular, before God. In this way we will be filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:52) and will live out righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, which are the reality of the kingdom of God. (Recovery Version, Rom. 14:17, note 2)

In summary, the life revealed in Matthew 5 through 7 is a life in the genuine church today, under God's rule and authority in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens in the current age. May we all be ushered into the constricted way revealed in these chapters to build a house upon the solid rock according to the will of our heavenly Father!

The Manifestation of the Kingdom of the Heavens

The manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens is the coming of the kingdom in full at the Lord's return. It is the kingdom of one thousand years, the millennium, which is known as the kingdom age, or the dispensation of the kingdom, in which Christ and the overcoming saints will rule over the earth. When the Lord Jesus comes back, He will subdue the whole world, and the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord. At that time the kingdom of the heavens will be manifested in an open way (Rev. 11:15). The kingdom of the heavens will become the ruling power and will govern in a manifested, open way, not in a mysterious and hidden way. Specifically, the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens is the heavenly part of the coming millennial kingdom, which is referred to as the kingdom of the Father in Matthew 13:43. (The earthly part of the millennial kingdom is the Messianic kingdom, which is referred to as the kingdom of the Son of Man in verse 41, and which is the restored tabernacle of David, the kingdom of Israel in Acts 15:16. *Heavenly* and *earthly* here refer not to places but to nature and condition.) In the heavenly part of the millennial kingdom,

The basic concept of the constitution of the kingdom of the heavens is that the kingdom people should be righteously strict with themselves, mercifully kind toward others, and secretly pure toward God.

which is the kingdom of the heavens manifested in power, the overcoming believers will reign with Christ for a thousand years (Rev. 20:4, 6). In the earthly part of the millennial kingdom, which is the Messianic kingdom on earth, the saved remnant of Israel will be the priests and will teach the nations to worship God (Zech. 8:20-23).

The manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens may be considered the transfer of the reality of the kingdom of the heavens (Lee, *Kingdom* 379). In the next age, the reality of the kingdom will become the manifestation of the kingdom. The appearance of the kingdom, however, will not be transferred into the next age but will be burned away (Matt. 13:41-42). At the time of the Lord's coming, there will be three kinds of Christians. The false, nominal Christians, signified by the tares, will be gathered and put into the fire. The overcoming Christians are those genuine believers who lived the kingdom life during their life in the church age. These overcomers are in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens, and they are the reality of the kingdom of the heavens. Third, there

will be many genuine, born again believers who did not live in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens in their lifetime. These are real Christians, but defeated Christians. At His coming, the Lord will deal first with the appearance of the kingdom, the tares, the false believers. Then He will set up His judgment seat to make a differentiation between the overcoming and defeated Christians (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10). As a result of this judgment, He will transfer the overcomers as the reality of the kingdom into the next age to become the manifestation of the kingdom. At the same time, however, He will send away the defeated ones for a time of discipline during the kingdom age.

When the Lord Jesus comes back, He will bring the kingdom with Him in full; that will be the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens. The parable of the ten virgins and the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 are fulfilled at the coming of the Lord, who is signified there by the bridegroom and the man who went abroad. “At that time,” that is, at the time of the Lord’s coming (24:40; 25:1), some of the believers will enter into the marriage feast with the Lord, while others will not (vv. 10-12). Similarly, some of the believers will enter into the joy of the Lord, while others will not (vv. 21, 23, 30). The wise virgins of the first parable are those believers who bear the Lord’s testimony, go out of the world to meet the Lord, and buy oil for their vessels; that is, they gain the filling of the Holy Spirit in their entire inner being. Having the filling of the Holy Spirit in this way is at a cost, such as giving up the world, dealing with self, loving the Lord above all, and counting all things loss for Christ. This indicates that the five wise virgins are living in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens, but the foolish virgins are not. The wise virgins are in the reality of the kingdom in the church age, and they will enter into the kingdom to share in its manifestation in the kingdom age. However, the foolish virgins, who do not pay the price today, will have to pay it after they are resurrected, that is, during the kingdom age. The faithful slaves of the second parable are those believers who exercise faith to be positive, aggressive, and active in using the Lord’s gift. Those, however, who are fearful, negative, and passive in the Lord’s work will lose their gift and receive a punishment from the Lord during the kingdom age. Again, this demonstrates that the five-talented slave and the two-talented slave lived in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens, but the wicked one-talented slave did not. These are basic and crucial teachings in the New Testament concerning the kingdom of the heavens.

Entering into the Kingdom and Inheriting the Kingdom

John 3:3 says, “Jesus answered and said to him, Truly, truly, I say to you, Unless one is born anew, he cannot see

the kingdom of God.” To see the kingdom of God is to enter into it. By being born anew, the believers receive the divine life of God as the requirement for entering into the kingdom of God as the divine realm. This means that all Christians by their regeneration have been brought under the rule of the heavens. Matthew 5:20, however, speaks of another kind of entering. This verse says, “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall by no means enter into the kingdom of the heavens.” Whereas John speaks of entrance into the kingdom of God, Matthew speaks of entrance into the kingdom of the heavens. There is more than a small distinction to be made here. To enter into the kingdom of God is a matter of regeneration, the new birth, which is common to all genuine believers. To enter into the kingdom of the heavens, on the other hand, depends on the believers’ surpassing righteousness. *Righteousness* here does not refer only to objective righteousness, which is the Christ whom we receive when we believe and are thus justified before God (1 Cor. 1:30; Rom. 3:26). It refers more to subjective righteousness, which is the indwelling Christ lived out of us as our righteousness that we may live in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens today and enter into its manifestation in the future. This righteousness, which is likened to the wedding garment, qualifies us to participate in the wedding of the Lamb (Matt. 22:11-12; Rev. 19:7-8) and inherit the kingdom of the heavens in its manifestation, that is, to enter into the kingdom of the heavens in the future. Therefore, to enter into the kingdom of the heavens, as dealt with by Matthew, is to live in its reality today and to participate in its manifestation in the future.

Similarly, the Lord said in Matthew 7:21, “Not every one who says to Me, Lord, Lord, will enter into the kingdom of the heavens, but he who does the will of My Father who is in the heavens.” To call on the Lord’s name, as suggested here by “Lord, Lord,” suffices for us to be saved (Rom. 10:13), but to enter into the kingdom of the heavens, we also need to do the will of the heavenly Father. This indicates that entering into the kingdom of the heavens is clearly different from entering into the kingdom of God by regeneration. After such a marvelous beginning by regeneration, as spoken of by John, many believers are not willing to do the will of the heavenly Father and be ruled by the heavens. They were brought into the kingdom by their new birth, but they do not continue practically in the kingdom. Therefore, many true believers are defeated, while only a few are victorious and overcoming:

The overcomers are the ones who are willing to be under the rule of the kingdom of the heavens. They are willing to live and walk and do things according to the teachings of the Lord concerning the reality of the kingdom in Matthew 5–7. They are sanctified, they are victorious over sin, self, the flesh, and the world, and they are in the

process of being transformed....God's intention in regenerating us is to bring us under His heavenly rule. But many of us, after being regenerated, are not willing to be ruled by the heavens. We are in the church, but we are not in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens. (Lee, *Definition 31-32*)

Those defeated, even rebellious and sinful, believers who do not live in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens today will not enter into the kingdom of the heavens in the future; that is, they will not be transferred into its manifestation in the kingdom age to rule and reign with the Lord, although of course, they are saved eternally and will be with the Lord in the eternal age.

The New Testament also speaks of inheriting the kingdom. To inherit is both to naturally receive by birth and to rightly receive by a legal qualification. A comparison of Matthew 19:29 with Mark 10:30 and Luke 18:30 shows that a believer's inheritance, at least in some respects, is in the coming age. Thus, to inherit the kingdom is to enter into the kingdom in its manifestation in the coming age. Paul chides the Corinthians and reminds them, "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?" (1 Cor. 6:9). Paul's concept of righteousness here is not the objective righteousness that we receive by faith in Christ. Those in verses 9 and 10, who are not qualified to enter the coming kingdom, are not spoken of as being without saving faith but as being without moral constitution, that is, without Christ as their subjective righteousness. Since the entrance into the kingdom of God referred to in John 3 is by a new birth, based on the objective righteousness of Christ imputed by faith, it is without respect of moral condition, either as a prerequisite or a mandatory result, for an immoral person can be saved to enter the kingdom of God by faith, and a believer who has entered the kingdom of God can still live immorally. Therefore the "rigid exclusion from the kingdom of God of *all wrong-doers* of every kind (included here under ἄδικοι)" (Alford 2: 515) must be explained apart from the new birth. Lenski correctly notes, "The requirements for inheriting God's kingdom go much farther than the avoidance of such open sins," but he generalizes too broadly: "The presence of any one of them in a man is evidence that he is debarred from heaven" (*Corinthians 249*). His conclusion is that gross immorality in itself does not exclude a man from the kingdom (here incorrectly called *heaven*); rather, it is a sign that his unbelief and unsaved position have already excluded him. This is convenient, but simple observation tells us that sin, even gross immorality, is not the exclusive domain of the unbelieving and unsaved. The case of the evil brother in 1 Corinthians 5 is but one of many biblical examples of a believer in sin. We must take the constricted way, not the convenient one, to see that an unrighteous, sinful believer cannot legally inherit the kingdom in the

coming age. Inheritance here must refer not to the natural inheritance of God's children by birth but to the legal inheritance of God's mature sons under the rule and principles of the kingdom. Therefore, to inherit the kingdom in the next age is a matter of the righteousness of the believers; it is a reward to the saints who seek righteousness (Matt. 5:10, 20; 6:33).

We find a similar word from Paul in Galatians 5. He reminds the Galatians that they were called for freedom but warns them not to turn this freedom into an opportunity for the flesh; rather, they should walk by the Spirit and be led by the Spirit (vv. 13, 16-18). He then names a representative list of the works of the flesh and concludes, "Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (vv. 19-21). Clearly, this portion of Galatians does not speak of the saved in contrast to the unsaved. Instead, it speaks simply of the Spirit versus the flesh. Paul is speaking to the Galatians, who are saved. It is the Galatian believers, then, who if they live licentiously in the flesh will be in danger of not inheriting the kingdom in the coming age. Here again the inheritance of the kingdom of God refers to the enjoyment of the coming

Those defeated, even rebellious and sinful, believers who do not live in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens today will not enter into the kingdom of the heavens in the future.

kingdom as a reward to the overcoming believers. It is not the same as a believer's salvation; it is a reward in addition to the believer's salvation.

Paul declares the same truth yet again in Ephesians 5:5, which says, "For this you realize, knowing that every fornicator or unclean person or greedy person (who is an idolater) has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God." This word is spoken not as a gospel message to unbelievers but as a word of exhortation to the believers in Ephesus, whose practical need was no longer to believe unto salvation but, having been saved, to have a living in the daily walk of the Body of Christ, including to become imitators of God, to walk in love, to do that which is fitting, to give thanks, and to walk as children of light (vv. 1-8). Still there was the danger among even the Ephesians that they may walk as the Gentiles also walk and do what is not fitting for saints (4:17; 5:3). Those who walk in this way will have no inheritance in the kingdom of God and of Christ. Again we conclude that not all believers, only the overcoming ones,

will participate in the kingdom of Christ and of God, the millennium. In the coming age the unclean, defeated ones will have no inheritance there. But if we, by the exercise of the kingdom today, walk and live in the Spirit for the growth, development, and maturity of the virtues of the divine life, “the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly and bountifully supplied” to us (2 Pet. 1:11).

In this article we have touched the definition, dispensational structure, and many principles of the kingdom of the heavens. We have, as yet, left many great matters untouched. We hope that in the future the Lord will allow us to examine the deeper, subjective truths of the kingdom related to the Father’s life, the all-inclusive Christ as the growing seed of the kingdom, the indwelling Christ as our subjective righteousness, and the life-giving Spirit. Here, though, we have seen that the kingdom of the heavens is the heavenly ruling, the heavenly government, of the Lord Jesus even in this age, the church age. After we have been regenerated, we have to be under this ruling. If we are under this ruling, we will be victorious and overcoming. We will be in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens, and we will enter into the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens to rule and reign with the Lord in the coming age of one thousand years. But if we are defeated Christians, when the Lord Jesus comes back we will suffer loss and we will be disciplined by Him. When the Lord returns, we will be rewarded or punished according to our exercise in the kingdom. Such a thought and our deep longing in the light of the kingdom is expressed in stanzas 1, 2, and 7 of *Hymns*, #947:

God’s Kingdom today is a real exercise,
But when Christ comes to reign it will be a great prize;
It is wisdom divine that we now may be trained
That His plan be fulfilled and His justice maintained.

God’s children, we’re born to be kings with His Son,
And we need to be trained that we may overcome
And to know how to rule in His kingdom as kings,
That His kingship thru us be expressed o’er all things.

O Lord, give us grace for Thy Kingdom to live,
To be trained that Thou may the reward to us give;
Make the Kingdom’s reality our exercise,
That its manifestation may be our great prize.

by John Campbell

Notes

¹We say thirty-three, even though the phrase *the kingdom of the heavens* is elided in the original Greek of Matthew 25:14. The phrase is rightly provided in many translations, since the transitional *for* introduces the second parable of that chapter as an extension of the first.

²Although all serious expositors interpret the tares as false believers, many interpret the abnormal growth of the great tree and the leaven in the fine flour in a favorable way. However, for a mustard seed to develop into a tree is against the God-ordained principle of growth “according to their kind” (Gen. 1:11-12). Similarly, leaven is always used in the Scriptures in a negative way (Lev. 2:11; 1 Cor. 5:6-7).

³For such a diagram, please see “A Chart Showing the Difference between the Kingdom of the Heavens and the Kingdom of God” in the Recovery Version of the New Testament, 30-31.

⁴The arguments concerning the kingdom of the heavens are extensive. We can, for example, enter into the fray concerning the keys of the kingdom given to Peter by the Lord in Matthew 16. Loathing, as we do, that such a charge given to Peter elevates him to an inordinate and unscriptural supremacy in the church, Darby insists that the building of the church in verse 18 has nothing to do with the kingdom of the heavens in verse 19 (12: 378; 14: 104). Yet we see, without assigning any supremacy to Peter, that his use of the keys in opening the door of the gospel to the Jews on the day of Pentecost and to the Gentiles at the house of Cornelius resulted in and was uniquely for the building of the church on the earth at that time.

⁵For many of the scriptural truths concerning the kingdom of the heavens, as presented here, we are indebted to *The Kingdom* and *Life-study of Matthew* by Witness Lee, published by Living Stream Ministry.

Works Cited

- Alford, Henry. *Alford’s Greek Testament, An Exegetical and Critical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980. 4 vols.
- Darby, J. N. *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*. Sunbury: Believers’ Bookshelf, 1971. 34 vols.
- Hymns*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1985.
- Ladd, G. E. “Kingdom of Christ, God, Heaven.” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Ed. Walter A. Elwell. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984. 607-611.
- Lee, Witness. *A Brief Definition of the Kingdom of the Heavens*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1986.
- . Footnotes. Recovery Version of the New Testament. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1991.
- . *The Kingdom*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1980.
- Lenski, R. C. H. *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963.
- . *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963.
- MacArthur, John F. *The Glory of Heaven*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1996.
- Oates, Whitney J., ed. *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1948.