



The Coming Kingdom: The Realization and Manifestation of God's Image and God's Dominion

by John Pester

You then pray in this way: Our Father who is in the heavens, Your name be sanctified; Your kingdom come; Your will be done...For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.
(Matt. 6:9-10, 13)

The Lord's prayer in Matthew 6:9-13 is short, simple, and deep, but it is often repeated in a rote and ritualistic manner. This is indeed ironic since the Lord's teaching concerning prayer and His example of prayer were offered in contrast to the prayers of religious hypocrites who prayed with a multiplicity of empty words that were focused only on advancing their immediate needs, not the eternal interest of God. In contrast to prayers that address the passing nature of our personal needs and that can result only in a temporary reward of misplaced admiration (vv. 8, 5), the Lord taught His disciples to focus on matters that would result in a true reward (v. 6). Consequently, He uttered a prayer that was entirely focused on the fulfillment of the eternal purpose of the Triune God,¹ which was revealed in the creation of humanity: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them have dominion" (Gen. 1:26). God's will ultimately pertains to image and dominion, and His image in humanity and His dominion through humanity on earth will be an eternal testimony of the scope and fulfillment of His purpose.

God's will is accomplished through the sanctification of His name and the coming of His kingdom because God's image is expressed through His name and God's dominion is exercised through His kingdom. The expression of God's image and the exercise of God's dominion are distinct, but not separable, elements of His will.² God's image is the basis for God's dominion; it is the source of the power that is displayed in the exercise of His dominion. Image produces dominion, and dominion substantiates image. The nexus of image and dominion in the divine economy is the kingdom, and in the coming kingdom both image and

dominion are realized and manifested. The kingdom is more than a physical realm involving the ruling and reigning of God. It is also a heavenly realm that derives its power from the divine life inherent in the image of God in order to express the dominion of God. As such, the kingdom is a matter of crucial focus in the divine economy.

The centrality of the kingdom in the divine economy is emphasized with great clarity in the New Testament. The coming of the kingdom was declared in the ministry of John the Baptist. It was demonstrated in the ministry and teachings of Jesus. And it was developed and continued through the ministry and teaching of the apostles so that it could be realized through the church in this age and manifested in the coming millennium. In the coming kingdom, God's eternal intention for humanity to bear His image and to exercise His dominion is being fulfilled. The coming kingdom has a heavenly and spiritual component that corresponds to the inner essence of God's being, God's image, and a practical and earthly component that corresponds to the practical representation and exercise of God's dominion. The heavenly and spiritual component is directly related to the life of the Triune God, which is imparted through regeneration and which grows like a seed to reproduce the divine image through its power to transform, renew, and conform the believers to the image of the Son. Although this aspect of the kingdom does not come with observation, there is a practical and earthly component related to the exercise of dominion involving the incarnation of Christ, the building up of the church in this age, and the joint ruling of Christ and the overcomers in the coming millennium. In the coming kingdom, there is a heavenly and earthly exercise of God's divine authority based on the spiritual and practical expression of God's divine image.

The Coming Kingdom in the New Testament

The kingdom is coming; it is a developing reality. It is here

in part, and it is coming in full. In fact, it is coming in full only because it is here in part. Its coming in full will be an expression of the divine life that is present within every believer in nascent form. As expressed in a hymn, it is both seed and flower, cone and tree: “As lives the flow’r within the seed, / As in the cone the tree” (*Hymns*, #507). The coming kingdom is an imparted seed that is growing through the power of God’s divine life (Matt. 13:24; Luke 8:10-11; Col. 2:19; Heb. 7:16), and the coming kingdom is the flower, the corporate blossoming in glory, of the seed of God’s divine life. The kingdom is coming because it is a living person, Christ, who through the impartation of His divine life, is being enlarged in and through His Body, the church. This wonderful person, who embodied God’s image in His living and who exercised God’s dominion in His work, was the initial coming of the kingdom to the earth. Now this wonderful person is flowering through the church, which is being renewed according to His image and which exercises His authority on earth (Col. 3:10; Matt. 16:19; John 20:23). The coming kingdom is organic in its inception, organic in its demonstration and spread, organic in its expression through the church, and ultimately organic, but intensely practical, in its manifestation in the millennium.

The Coming Kingdom Declared in the Ministry of John the Baptist

According to the Gospel of Matthew, which is structured according to the doctrine of the kingdom,³ the coming of the kingdom begins with John the Baptist’s ministry and message of repentance: “Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near” (3:2). Even though repentance for the kingdom was the focus of John’s ministry, it is not clear whether he truly saw the intrinsic relationship between the kingdom and the person and work of Christ, including the producing and building up of the church.⁴ John’s understanding of the kingdom seems to be limited to Messianic notions related to the restoration of the physical kingdom of David. This can be seen in his expression of doubt, which was contained in his question for the Lord following his imprisonment: “Are You the Coming One, or should we expect another?” (11:3). For John, the Coming One would bring in the kingdom of David with power. Consequently, John could not reconcile the fact of his imprisonment with the Lord’s apparent inaction toward his plight, especially since he had served to recommend the Lord to the nation of Israel. In effect, he attributed the Lord’s inaction to a lack of power, and a lack of power to the possibility that the Lord was not the Coming One. In the Gospel of Matthew, however, the hallmark of the kingdom is repentance, not an outward reign.

Repentance, as the opening of God’s New Testament economy, involved making a turn for the kingdom of the

heavens. This indicates that God’s New Testament economy is focused on His kingdom. For this we should repent, change our mind, make a turn in our life-pursuit. The goal of our pursuing has been other things; now our pursuing must turn toward God and His kingdom, which in Matthew (cf. Mark 1:15) is specifically and purposefully called “the kingdom of the heavens.” According to the Gospel of Matthew as a whole, the kingdom of the heavens is different from the Messianic kingdom. The Messianic kingdom will be the restored kingdom of David (the rebuilt tabernacle of David—Acts 15:16), made up of the children of Israel, and will be earthly and physical in nature; whereas the kingdom of the heavens is constituted of regenerated believers and is heavenly and spiritual. (Recovery Version, Matt. 3:2, note 2)

The kingdom of the heavens in its fuller development speaks of the church and the establishment of the church on the day of Pentecost, which was made possible through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. As such, it is a special subset of the kingdom of God, which entails the ruling and reigning of God from eternity to eternity, and it is different from the restored kingdom of David among the Jews in the millennium (see the chart and detailed footnote on page 40). Even though John declared the coming kingdom, he was limited in his understanding that the kingdom of the heavens would be intrinsically rooted in the person and work of Christ.⁵ A complete understanding of the true significance of the kingdom of the heavens would only come later through the direct words and demonstrated actions of the Lord and through the spread and unveiling of the apostles’ ministry.⁶

The Coming Kingdom Demonstrated in the Ministry of the Lord Jesus

Although John the Baptist did not present a fully developed understanding of the kingdom, the Lord did not cast aside his contribution to the coming of the kingdom; rather, He acknowledged it, repeated the core elements of John’s words, and demonstrated them in His public ministry and private speaking to His disciples. According to the record of Matthew, the Lord heard of John’s being delivered up immediately after His temptation in the wilderness, prior to the start of His public ministry (4:12). When He began His ministry, He started by proclaiming John’s message: “Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near” (v. 17). In this regard, He demonstrated the continuity of His teaching with John’s message concerning the coming of the kingdom of the heavens. “The new King continued the preaching of His forerunner, John the Baptist (3:2)” (Recovery Version, 4:17, note 1). The Lord did not speak something new and altogether different; rather, He built upon the ministry of John, demonstrating that the intrinsic content of the kingdom involved

the application of the power of the divine life upon the Satan-corrupted and damaged world. He “went about in all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every sickness among the people” (v. 23). In His demonstration the Lord focused His followers’ attention on the intrinsic good news of the kingdom and away from outward concepts of the kingdom. He showed them that the gospel of the kingdom addressed more than just the political and military bondage of the nation of Israel, particularly the bondage of all humanity to the ravages of sin and death. In verse 23

the gospel is called “the gospel of the kingdom.” It includes not only forgiveness of sins (cf. Luke 24:47) and the imparting of life (cf. John 20:31) but also the kingdom of the heavens (24:14) with the power of the coming age (Heb. 6:5), the power to cast out demons and heal diseases (Isa. 35:5-6; Matt. 10:1). Both forgiveness of sins and the imparting of life are for the kingdom. (Recovery Version, note 2)

The actions of the Lord in verse 23—teaching, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing the sick—reveal His four-fold commission, which is fully unveiled in Luke 4:31-44. His commission involved teaching, casting out demons, healing, and preaching (Recovery Version, outline). The proclaiming of the gospel of the kingdom, as indicated in the note above, involved more than merely speaking words about the kingdom; it also involved a demonstration of the power of the coming kingdom age, including the power to cast out demons. The Lord’s fourfold commission was a work that was rooted in His person. When the Lord said, “I must announce the gospel of the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this I was sent” (v. 43), it was an indication that the fulfillment of His commission depended upon the presence of His person. It is not insignificant that a great light came to the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali only when the Lord came to those darkened regions (Matt. 4:15-16). Everywhere the Lord went, He revealed the light of life that was within Him and that He desired to impart as a seed, through words of spirit and life, into those who would hear and respond to His call to believe into Him as the reality of the kingdom. The essence of the Lord’s ministry is that

the kingdom of God is the Savior...as the seed of life sown into His believers, God’s chosen people (Mark 4:3, 26), and developing into a realm over which God can rule

as His kingdom in His divine life. The entrance into the kingdom is regeneration (John 3:5), and the development of the kingdom is the believers’ growth in the divine life (2 Pet. 1:3-11). The kingdom is the church life today, in which the faithful believers live (Rom. 14:17), and it will develop into the coming kingdom as a reward to be inherited (Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5) by the overcoming saints in the millennium (Rev. 20:4, 6). Eventually, it will consummate in the New Jerusalem as the eternal kingdom of God, an eternal realm of the eternal blessing of God’s eternal life, which all God’s redeemed will enjoy in the new heaven and new earth for eternity...Such a kingdom, the kingdom of God, is what the Savior announced here as the gospel, the good news, to those who were alienated from the life of God (Eph. 4:18). (Recovery Version, Luke 4:43, note 2)

The Lord demonstrated the intrinsic and organic nature of the kingdom and its intimate connection to the release of His divine life through death and resurrection in Matthew 16:28 through 17:9. In 16:28 He declared to His disciples that some of those standing with Him would by

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no means taste death until they saw the Son of Man coming in His kingdom. These words were fulfilled when He took some of those who were with Him—Peter, James, and John—to a high mountain, where He was transfigured before them with His face shining like the sun (17:1-2). The coming kingdom surely manifests the glory of God (24:30; 1 Thes. 2:12), and when Peter recalled this experience on the mountain, he acknowledged the glory of the Lord’s transfiguration, saying,

He received from God the Father honor and glory, a voice such as this being borne to Him by the magnificent glory: This is My Son, My Beloved, in whom I delight. And this voice we heard being borne out of heaven while we were with Him in the holy mountain. (2 Pet. 1:17-18)

After the Lord revealed the glory of the coming kingdom, a glory inherent within His divine life and nature but also hidden within His human nature,⁷ the Lord charged His disciples to “tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is raised from the dead” (Matt. 17:9). This indicates that apart from His death and resurrection—a process which

would release the divine life from within His humanity as fire cast on the earth (Luke 12:49-50) and thereby enlighten the believers—the coming of the kingdom would remain an inexplicable matter.

The Lord's charge to keep the vision on the mountain a secret echoed a similar charge to His disciples in Matthew 16:20. After Peter acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lord spoke of the church for the first time and linked this revelation to the kingdom of the heavens, saying, "Upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of the heavens" (vv. 18-19). With His interchangeable use of the word *church* with the term *the kingdom of the heavens*, the Lord revealed that the kingdom of the heavens would be built upon the revelation of Him as the Son of the living God, the God who gives life and who builds with the divine life for the exercise of divine authority. Following this revelation, He charged His disciples to tell no one that He was the Christ, but He also "began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised" (v. 21). It is significant that the Lord spoke of His death and resurrection for the first time in the context of the church and the kingdom of the heavens. This indicates that His life, which is the source of the church and the base of the kingdom of the heavens, would be released through His death and resurrection.

Following His death and resurrection, Luke records that the Lord "presented Himself alive after His suffering by many irrefutable proofs, appearing to them through a period of forty days and speaking the things concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). During these days, the Lord demonstrated the reality of the kingdom while speaking of the kingdom. His speaking to them concerning the kingdom proved that

the kingdom of God would be the main subject of the apostles' preaching in their commission that was to come after Pentecost (8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). It is not a material kingdom visible to human sight 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. (Recovery Version, 1:3, note 4)

The kingdom that John the Baptist declared was continued by the Lord Jesus. In His ministry He both taught and demonstrated the reality of the kingdom, and following His death and resurrection, He charged His disciples to continue His ministry: "You shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (v. 8). *You shall be My witnesses* is an organic clarification and restatement of the

Lord's charge in Matthew 24:14 to preach the gospel of the kingdom in the whole inhabited earth for a testimony. His words point to the fact that the church does more than just witness about Christ; it witnesses Christ. The intrinsic content of the good news of the kingdom, the gospel of the kingdom, is the church as the living Christ being witnessed to the whole inhabited earth. The Lord's charge to His disciples in Acts 1:8 also demonstrated His willingness to commit the continuing spread and unveiling of the kingdom of the heavens into the hands of those who would come after Him. Just as He was willing to continue the ministry of John the Baptist, He was willing to entrust the continuation and even the consummation of the kingdom to the ministry of the apostles. This commitment is not an indication of some special eloquence or stature on the part of the apostles; it is a testimony to the Lord's faith in the power of the divine life to bring His witnesses into function, according to the measure of the gift of Christ, as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds and teachers, in order to organically and incorporate⁸ build up His church, the Body of Christ, and thereby bring the believers into the glory of the coming kingdom (Eph. 4:7, 11-12; Matt. 16:18).

The Coming Kingdom Spread and Unveiled through the Ministry of the Apostles

The coming kingdom began to spread on the day of the Lord's resurrection when He breathed Himself into the members of His Body in John 20:22, and the coming kingdom was fully unveiled through the ministry of the apostles. Through the Lord's breathing, the divine life was imparted into the disciples and realized as the Holy Spirit. In resurrection the Holy Spirit, the life-giving Spirit, the Spirit of life, was planted once again in humanity as the divine seed of the kingdom, and it began to grow.⁹ The growth of this divine seed is the spreading of the kingdom. As the Lord's witnesses were dispersed throughout the inhabited earth, bringing others into the fellowship of the Son, the kingdom spread as well. The spread of the coming kingdom is largely predicated upon two essential components—teaching that unveils the economy of God and prayer that cooperates with God. Both of these components are depicted in Acts in the account of the disciples' activities in the fifty days leading up to the outpouring of the Spirit, which would clothe the Body with the Spirit of power in order to spread and enlarge the kingdom.

When the Lord presented Himself alive to the disciples over a period of forty days, He spoke to them concerning the kingdom of God (1:3). In response to His teaching, those who came together asked, "Lord, are You at this time restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (v. 6), exposing their lack of understanding concerning the coming kingdom. At this point in time,

The kingdom of Israel, for which the apostles and other devout Jews were looking, was a material kingdom, unlike God's kingdom of life, which is mentioned in v. 3 and which Christ is building up through the preaching of His gospel. (Recovery Version, v. 6, note 1)

The Lord responded by turning them from considerations related to an outward, visible manifestation of the kingdom—the times and seasons of which are set by the Father—to the inward, invisible development of the kingdom, which requires the Holy Spirit's operating with power in and upon living witnesses (vv. 7-8). During this period of forty days, the Lord taught the disciples about the reality of the kingdom of the heavens and trained them to live according to the reality of the kingdom of the heavens, which is His living presence, whether visible or invisible. He taught the disciples with enlightening words; He trained the disciples by "appearing to them through a period of forty days" (v. 3).

The resurrected Christ dwelt in the disciples, because He had breathed Himself as the Spirit into them on the day of His resurrection (John 20:22). His appearing does not mean that He had ever left them; it simply means that He made His presence visible to them, training them to realize and enjoy His invisible presence. (Recovery Version, Acts 1:3, note 2)

After this forty-day period of trial and testing, the Lord ascended to the heavens yet at the same time remained within the disciples as the indwelling Spirit. Even though they had known the Lord according to the flesh, from this point forward, they knew Him so no longer (2 Cor. 5:16). By this time, however, some light of revelation concerning the coming kingdom had dawned upon their hearts and minds because their response to the Lord's physical departure was to pray in one accord over the next ten days. There should be little doubt that their prayers were related to the coming of the kingdom because the one prayer that is recorded involves their realization of the need to fill the place of Judas with a disciple who had accompanied Jesus with them, "beginning from the baptism of John until the day on which He was taken up from us" and who could "become a witness of His resurrection with us" (Acts 1:22). Consequently, they prayed to fill a need related to the spread of the kingdom (vv. 24-25). With the clarity of their focus and the power of their one accord,

the disciples might have prayed to be clothed with the Spirit of power, the promise of the Father, for which the

Lord had charged them to remain in Jerusalem (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4), and might also have prayed for the commission given to them by the Lord in Luke 24:47-48 and 1:8 of this book to bear His testimony to the uttermost part of the earth.

God wanted to pour out His Spirit for the carrying out of His New Testament economy and had promised to do it. Yet He still needed His chosen people to pray for this. As God in heaven, He needs men on earth to cooperate with Him for the carrying out of His plan. The one hundred twenty disciples' praying for ten days met this need of God's. (Recovery Version, Acts 1:14, note 3)

The central components of teaching and prayer for the spread of the kingdom can also be seen in the apostles' desire to give themselves, continually and steadfastly, in prayer and in the ministry of the word (6:4). With their prayer, the apostles cooperated with God on a practical level, and with their teaching, the apostles imparted the divine life on a mystical level. Through the revelation in their teaching and the cooperation of their prayer, the

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apostles spread and unveiled the kingdom of the heavens as the church by spreading the gospel of the kingdom to the inhabited earth. Both their prayers¹⁰ and their teaching in their ministry were directed toward unveiling the kingdom.

The content of the apostles' ministry concerned the kingdom and unveiled the kingdom to those who received their word as it truly was, the word of God (1 Thes. 2:13). At the end of his recorded account of Paul's ministry, Luke writes that Paul "remained two whole years in his own rented dwelling and welcomed all those who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, unhindered" (Acts 28:30-31). Luke begins his account of the acts of the apostles with a reference to the Lord's teaching them concerning the kingdom of God, and he ends his account with a reference to Paul's teaching the same to others, indicating that the kingdom of God is a central focus of the ministry of God's New Testament economy. Witness Lee observes that the acts of the apostles do not come to a formal conclusion in the book of Acts:

This book was not actually ended; rather, it was left open that more may be added. The reason for this must have been that the work of the Holy Spirit in preaching Christ for His propagation, multiplication, and spread through the believers of Christ was not yet completed and needed to be continued for a long period of time. Such an evangelistic work for Christ's propagation, multiplication, and spread is according to God's New Testament economy for the producing of many sons for God (Rom. 8:29) that they might be the members of Christ to constitute His Body (Rom. 12:5) for the carrying out of God's eternal plan and the fulfillment of His eternal will. This is revealed in detail in the twenty-one Epistles and the book of Revelation, which follow this book. The church produced by Christ's propagation and multiplication is the sphere in which God is expressed and in which He reigns in Christ; hence, the church becomes the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God, along with Christ's propagation and multiplication, grows out of and spreads from God's life. Acts is a record of the spreading of Christ; it is also a record of the kingdom of God, because the kingdom of God is the expansion of Christ. The gospel that is widely preached in this book is the very Christ as the gospel (5:42), the gospel of Christ, and it is also the kingdom of God as the gospel (8:12), the gospel of the kingdom of God. The preaching of such a gospel will continue and advance until the whole earth becomes the kingdom of Christ (Rev. 11:15).

In the four Gospels God was incarnated, passed through human living, died, and resurrected, thus completing Christ, the embodiment of the Triune God (Col. 2:9). In Acts this embodiment of God, as the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45), spreads Christ into His believers, i.e., works the processed Triune God into His chosen, redeemed, and transformed people to make them the constituents of the church, through which God may be expressed. The ultimate issue of the church will be the New Jerusalem in eternity future as God's full and eternal expression, which will also be God's eternal kingdom as the sphere in which He reigns in His divine life in eternity forever and ever. This should be the reality and goal of all gospel preaching today. (Recovery Version, Acts 28:31, note 2)

The kingdom of God, which the Lord demonstrated and which the disciples spread, is unveiled in the twenty-one Epistles and the book of Revelation through the ministry of the apostles. In particular, these Epistles reveal that the kingdom of the heavens, embodied in the person of Christ, has been expanded and enlarged through the church, which is the organic expression of the seed of the divine life that has been imparted into those who believe, regenerating them with the divine life that has the capacity to grow and develop into a full expression of the Triune God. As such, the kingdom of God has not been suspended,

but according to the revelation contained in the ministry of the apostles, it is a coming reality in this age.

The Coming Kingdom Realized in This Age

There are many who, according to outward observation, would question whether the kingdom of God can be a reality in an age fraught with evil and inexplicable levels of human suffering.¹¹ Those who fixate on these undeniable expressions of satanic chaos often question the reality of God, to say nothing about the reality of the kingdom of God. Nevertheless, the coming kingdom is a reality in this age, but it is a hidden reality, reflecting the hidden and subtle nature of the operation of the divine life. This hidden operation begins within the hidden man of the heart, a meek and quiet spirit, which is very costly in the sight of God (1 Pet. 3:4). The human spirit is the soil for the kingdom seed, and when this soil receives the seed of the divine Spirit through faith, a believer both sees and enters into the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5).¹² Since this kingdom seed is received by faith, it is beyond the comprehension of unregenerated humanity. Nevertheless, when this kingdom seed grows, it is expressed and realized through the church¹³ as a righteous, joyous, and peaceful realm.

The reality of the coming kingdom is hidden and beyond outward observation because the intrinsic component of the kingdom, the operation of the divine life of God, can be substantiated only by faith. The mind of an unbeliever is veiled to the reality of the kingdom because the things of God can be known only by the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:11).¹⁴ When the Lord

was questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, Behold, here it is! or, There! For behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you. (Luke 17:20-21)

According to the concept of the Pharisees, the coming of the kingdom of God involved the outward, visible manifestation of a Messianic kingdom, the restored kingdom of David (Acts 15:16). But the Lord's word that the kingdom does not come with observation indicated

that the kingdom of God is not material but spiritual. It is the Savior in His first coming (vv. 21-22), in His second coming (vv. 23-30), in the rapture of His overcoming believers (vv. 31-36), and in His destroying of the Antichrist (v. 37) to recover the whole earth for His reign there (Rev. 11:15). (Recovery Version, Luke 17:20, note 2)

Even with all the attention that the Pharisees devoted to their concept of the kingdom, they were unable to see the

reality of the kingdom that was in their midst, even right in front of them.

The kingdom of God is the Savior Himself, who was among the Pharisees when He was questioned by them. Wherever the Savior is, there the kingdom of God is. The kingdom of God is with Him, and He brings it to His disciples (v. 22). He is the seed of the kingdom of God to be sown into God's chosen people to develop into God's ruling realm...Since His resurrection He has been within His believers (John 14:20; Rom. 8:10). Hence, the kingdom of God is within the church today (Rom. 14:17). (Recovery Version, Luke 17:21, note 1)

This veiled understanding of the Pharisees was prevalent among the Jews in general and even among the disciples. When the Lord arrived in Jerusalem before His death, throngs of Jewish inhabitants of Jerusalem went before Him and cried out, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!" (Mark 11:9-10). When two disciples of the Lord were walking on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection, their conversation focused only on the coming of an outward kingdom, as one said, "We were hoping that He was the One who was about to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all these things, it is now going on the third day since these things took place" (Luke 24:21).

These Messianic hopes and expectations were so common that Paul encountered them even at the end of his recorded ministry. According to Luke, many came to Paul's lodging

to whom he expounded these matters, solemnly testifying of the kingdom of God and persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning until evening. And some were persuaded by the things which were said, but others did not believe. (Acts 28:23-24)

Those who believed entered into the reality of the kingdom, and those who did not believe, because Paul's words concerning Jesus from both the Law and the Prophets in relationship to the kingdom of God did not conform to their natural understanding, departed. But they departed not only from Paul but also from the reality of the kingdom that could be realized within the church through faith.

According to the ministry of the New Testament, the

reality of the kingdom of the heavens is the church, not merely in its universal expression in the coming age but even more practically in its local, but spiritual and heavenly, expression on earth today. There is only one verse in the New Testament that actually provides a definition of the term *the kingdom of God*, and this definition is given by Paul in his words related to the practice of receiving the believers in a local church as a local expression of the Body of Christ:¹⁵ "The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). While there are numerous references to the kingdom in the New Testament, and even metaphorical descriptions of the kingdom, such as when the Lord likens the kingdom to a treasure hidden in the field (Matt. 13:44), a merchant seeking fine pearls (v. 45), or a net cast into the sea (v. 47), only Romans 14:17 defines the kingdom. In *The Gospel of the Kingdom with an Examination of Modern Dispensationalism*, Philip Mauro comments that it is "a cause for profound astonishment," when considering the scriptural teaching concerning the kingdom of God, that Romans 14:17 is ignored, since it "has the unique distinction of giving the

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Holy Spirit's own definition of that Kingdom" (97). Mauro cites this verse in order to refute the dispensational teaching that the kingdom has been suspended until the second coming of the Lord, arguing instead that the kingdom is a present reality.

In *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, George Eldon Ladd similarly argues that the kingdom is a present reality, but he also points out that there will be a full manifestation of the kingdom when the Lord returns:

The Word of God *does* say that the Kingdom of God is a present spiritual reality. "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). Righteousness and peace and joy are fruits of the Spirit which God bestows now upon those who yield their lives to the rule of the Spirit...At the same time, the Kingdom is an inheritance which God will bestow upon His people when Christ comes in glory. (16-17)

Even though Mauro and Ladd acknowledge the present

reality of the kingdom based on Romans 14:17, both of them view the kingdom more as a reflection of individual spirituality. Romans 14:17, however, is focused on the corporate realization and expression of the Body of Christ within a local church. Such a corporate expression depends upon the experience of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Each of these attributes are relational; that is, they depend upon interaction with God and man for their full expression. The sphere of this interaction is the Body of Christ, the church.

This verse is a strong proof that the church in the church age is the kingdom of God, because the context here deals with the church life in the present age. The church is a matter of grace and life, whereas the kingdom is a matter of exercise and discipline.

The kingdom of God is the sphere in which God exercises His authority so that He may express His glory for the fulfillment of His purpose. In such a kingdom, what matters is not eating and drinking but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. 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.

According to the context of this chapter, this verse was written for our receiving of the believers. If we receive the believers according to the apostle's instruction in this chapter, we will be right and proper toward those whom we receive and will have peace with them; thus, we will have joy in the Holy Spirit, proving that we are living in the reality of God's kingdom and are under God's rule. Otherwise, we will not be right or proper toward those whom we do not receive and will not have peace with them; thus, we will not have joy in the Holy Spirit before God, proving that we are not subject to God's authority in the kingdom of God. (Recovery Version, Rom. 14:17, notes 1 and 2)

Righteousness, peace, and joy are not easily observable,¹⁶ although their presence can be tested in the form of a negative; that is, the absence of righteousness is exposed by erroneous, improper, crooked, slanted, or

biased dealings with others; the absence of peace is exposed by envy, strife, and division; and the absence of joy is exposed by anxiety, stress, and a lack of contentment. The practical church life tests the believers in matters of righteousness, peace, and joy, and without the Holy Spirit, these attributes can only be imitated, but even then not for long because it is in such simple matters as eating and drinking that our individualistic tendency and capacity for dispute and critical judgment are exposed (vv. 1, 3). In order to receive the believers as they are, as God has received them (v. 3), there is the need for the operation of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

In Romans 12:2 Paul speaks of proving the will of God, which is the church as the Body of Christ (vv. 4-5), but in Romans 14 he speaks of the testing that occurs when the Body of Christ is expressed locally, a testing that is based primarily on our receiving of one another. This testing is altogether related to the coming of the kingdom as a present reality in the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, if the members of the Body experience the operation of the divine life and thereby express the kingdom on the earth today, there will come, according to the Father's timing, an opportunity to participate in the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens in the millennium, following the Lord's return and His determination of our kingdom status at His judgment seat (vv. 10-12). If we are blessed to be in the kingdom of the heavens today, we have little to fear in regard to His judgment at the beginning of the millennial manifestation of the coming kingdom.

The Coming Kingdom Manifested in the Millennial Age

Through the reality, experience, and testimony of the coming kingdom in this age, the church will usher in the coming kingdom as the millennial kingdom. When the will of God in regard to the kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven, there will be a testimony that satisfies God and shames His enemy. This will set the stage, even the times and the seasons, for the Lord's return, according to the Father's authority (Acts 1:7). This is according to the Lord's word in Matthew 24:14: "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole inhabited earth for a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come." In his footnote on this verse, Witness Lee draws a distinction between the gospel of grace, which is often manifested in contemporary preaching¹⁸ as the gospel of salvation from perdition by the free gift of God's grace in Christ, and the gospel of the kingdom:

The gospel of the kingdom, which includes the gospel of grace (Acts 20:24), brings people not only into God's salvation but also into the kingdom of the heavens (Rev. 1:9). The gospel of grace emphasizes forgiveness of sin, God's redemption, and eternal life, whereas the gospel of

the kingdom emphasizes the heavenly ruling of God and the authority of the Lord. This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole earth for a testimony to all the nations before the end of this age. Hence, that preaching, signified by the white horse of the first seal in Rev. 6:1-2, will be a sign of the consummation of this age. (Recovery Version, Matt. 24:14, note 1)

The white horse signifies more than just the spread of the gospel of grace; it reveals the kingdom element within the gospel. According to this sign, the move of the gospel involves spiritual warfare with God's enemy in order to spread the image and dominion that is inherent in the coming kingdom. This is seen in the description of the rider on the white horse who goes "forth conquering and to conquer (Rev. 6:2). When the gospel of the kingdom produces a testimony of the kingdom on earth, a testimony of image and dominion, the age will rapidly come to a close, following the declaration that "Now has come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ" (12:10). When the Lord returns, a new age of one thousand years will be inaugurated to be enjoyed by the overcoming believers who participated in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens to bring the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens to the earth.

The Lord taught us to pray for the coming of the kingdom (Matt. 6:10). Along with our praying for the kingdom's coming, we need to fight for it. The coming of the kingdom has two aspects: the reality of the kingdom (Matt. 5:3), which is in the proper church life today (Rom. 14:17), and the manifestation of the kingdom in the millennium, which will be brought in through the overcoming believers.

When the manifestation of the kingdom comes, the salvation of God will come in full with the kingdom. God's salvation has already been manifested to us today, but it will come in full in the kingdom age. It is the same with the power of God and the authority of His Christ. We have participated in God's power and Christ's authority today, but our full enjoyment of them will be in the kingdom age. (Recovery Version, Rev. 12:10, note 1)

A testimony of the kingdom will end this age because such a testimony involves the realization of God's image and the manifestation of God's dominion through the operation and power of the Spirit. In the millennium and ultimately in the New Jerusalem, the church, as the realization and manifestation of God's image and dominion,

will be on full display as the masterpiece of God, revealing the full flowering of the multifarious wisdom of God (Eph. 2:10; 3:10). The elements of image and dominion are clearly detectable in the coming millennium and in the New Jerusalem. In the millennium the overcomers share the priesthood with its element of image and the kingship with its element of dominion with Christ (Rev. 20:6), and as the New Jerusalem the redeemed, transformed, and glorified believers share in the glory, the image, of the city, which is under the throne, the dominion, of God and the Lamb, out from which flows a river of water of life, eternally dispensing the life and nature of the Triune God (21:11; 22:1). The coming of the kingdom will be consummated with the realization and manifestation of God's image and dominion in the millennium and in the New Jerusalem.

Image and Dominion in the Coming Kingdom

The coming kingdom fulfills God's intention for humanity to bear His image and to exercise His dominion as revealed in Genesis 1:26: "God said, Let Us make man

If the members of the Body experience the operation of the divine life and thereby express the kingdom on the earth today, there will come, according to the Father's timing, an opportunity to participate in the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens in the millennium, following the Lord's return and His determination of our kingdom status at His judgment seat.

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." *Image* refers to God's inner being, and it involves our expression of the inward essence of the attributes of God, which are inherent in the divine life of God. As such, image is related to spiritual matters that are heavenly in expression. *Dominion* refers to God's representation, and it involves the application of the authority of God, which is inherent in the divine life of God. As such, dominion is related to practical matters that are exercised on earth. Since the kingdom is the realization of image and dominion, both heavenly and spiritual components and practical and earthly components are operative in its coming. The coming of the kingdom depends upon heavenly and spiritual components related to the expression of image and to practical and earthly components related to the exercise of dominion. This can be seen in the Lord's prayer in Matthew 6:10 and in the Lord's words related to the church's exercise of authority in Matthew 16:19.

In Matthew 6:10 the Lord prayed that the will of God in heaven would be carried out on earth. The words *as in heaven, so also on earth* indicate that the heavenly and spiritual will of God is the starting point for the coming of the kingdom.

After the rebellion of Satan (Ezek. 28:17; Isa. 14:13-15), the earth fell into his usurping hand. Thus, the will of God could not be done on earth as in heaven. Hence, God created man with the intention of recovering the earth for Himself (Gen. 1:26-28). After the fall of man, Christ came to bring the heavenly rule to earth so that the earth could be recovered for God's interest, so that the will of God could be done on earth as in heaven. This is why the new King established the kingdom of the heavens with His followers. The kingdom people must pray for this until the earth is fully recovered for God's will in the coming kingdom age. (Recovery Version, Matt. 6:10, note 1)

In Matthew 16:19 the Lord indicated that the divine will is carried out by the church binding and loosing on earth what has already been bound and loosed in the heavens. The fulfillment of the divine will in the heavens to enlarge the expression of God, the image of God, depends upon the cooperation of the church to exercise God's dominion to defeat¹⁹ the satanic will by binding and loosing on earth what has been bound and loosed in the heavens. The coming of the kingdom, therefore, also involves the practical exercise of God's authority today.²⁰ The strong man, Satan, must be bound in order for the church to plunder his goods of fallen humanity, who are under his enslavement for his use as his vessels and instruments. This plundering of his house, which is his kingdom, is needed in order to return his goods to God as vessels for His use (12:29). In the coming kingdom, the realization and manifestation of God's image in the church, as a spiritual and heavenly component of the divine will, directs the exercise of God's dominion, as a practical and earthly component of the divine will. And in the coming kingdom, the realization and manifestation of God's dominion through the church fosters the further growth and development of the divine image in the church.

Image in the Coming Kingdom

The image of God in the coming kingdom comes from the divine life, which is the intrinsic content of the kingdom. This divine life is imparted into redeemed humanity through regeneration, which marks the believers' entrance into the kingdom (John 3:5). In verse 3 the Lord spoke to Nicodemus, saying, "Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God," and in verse 5 He said, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." These two verses reveal a stark difference between the prevailing Jewish concepts

of the kingdom during the time of the Lord's incarnation and the Lord's concept of the kingdom. The Jewish concept was focused on an outward reign in power, while the Lord was focused on an inward birth in life. While the kingdom of God is the reign of God, it is a "realm that requires the divine life. Only the divine life can realize the divine things. Hence, for one to see, or to enter into, the kingdom of God requires that he be regenerated with the divine life" (Recovery Version, v. 3, note 3). When an unbeliever hears the gospel and responds in faith, he enters into the kingdom by being born anew with the divine life that is imparted by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of life (v. 6; Rom. 8:2).

The gospel not only enlivens a new believer with the life that he was formerly alienated from, the life of God (Eph. 2:5; 4:18); it also enlightens a new believer with the light of life (John 8:12; 1:4). The gospel illuminates in addition to enlivening. Verse 5 of chapter 3 speaks of the enlivening of the divine life that enables one to enter into the kingdom, and verse 3 speaks of the illumination of the divine life that enables one to see the kingdom. When a believer is born anew, the illumination of the gospel of the glory of Christ shines on him and imparts Christ, who is the image of God, into him (2 Cor. 4:4). Regeneration does not impart the life of God as some abstract, spiritual element, but rather the life of God that is embodied in Christ and that is substantiated in Christ, who is the image of God. Consequently, when regeneration brings a believer into the kingdom of God, which is a realm of the divine life and a realm that bears the divine image, it also brings a believer back to his ordained status of bearing the image of God. According to Colossians 1:13, we have been delivered out of "the authority of darkness and transferred...into the kingdom of the Son of His love." This Son²¹ is subsequently identified in verse 15 as the One who is the image of the invisible God.

God is invisible. But the Son of His love, who is the effulgence of His glory and the impress of His substance (Heb. 1:3), is His image, expressing what He is. The image here is not a physical form but an expression of God's being in all His attributes and virtues. (Recovery Version, Col. 1:15, note 1)

As the divine life grows within regenerated humanity, the economical processes of transformation, renewing, and conformation progressively express the being of God in all His attributes and virtues by manifesting the image of Christ in the church as the Body of Christ (3:10). This progressive manifestation of the image of Christ through the transformation, renewing, and conformation of the members of the Body of Christ is the coming of the kingdom.

Although a believer bears the image of God in his regenerated spirit, there is a need for this image to spread to

his soul and ultimately to his body. The spread and increase of the divine image are equal to transformation, which is spoken of in Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18: “We all with unveiled face, beholding and reflecting like a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord Spirit.”

When we with unveiled face are beholding and reflecting the glory of the Lord, He infuses us with the elements of what He is and what He has done. Thus we are being transformed metabolically to have His life shape by His life power with His life essence; that is, we are being transfigured, mainly by the renewing of our mind (Rom. 12:2), into His image. *Being transformed* indicates that we are in the process of transformation. (Recovery Version, 2 Cor. 3:18, note 7)

Image in verse 18 refers to the “image of the resurrected and glorified Christ. To be transformed into the same image is to be conformed to the resurrected and glorified Christ, to be made the same as He is (Rom. 8:29)” (Recovery Version, 2 Cor. 3:18, note 8). Transformation, like image, is not an abstraction, a mere a spiritual concept. It has a definite “life shape” that comes out of the “life essence” of our glorious Lord. Peter describes the progression of this transformation in a detailed manner. His description, no doubt, reflects his own experience of the transforming operation of the Lord Spirit.

For this very reason also, adding all diligence, supply bountifully in your faith virtue; and in virtue, knowledge; and in knowledge, self-control; and in self-control, endurance; and in endurance, godliness; and in godliness, brotherly love; and in brotherly love, love. For these things, existing in you and abounding, constitute you neither idle nor unfruitful unto the full knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Pet. 1:5-8)

The full knowledge of our Lord is ultimately realized in a corporate realm of brotherly love and even more deeply in the incorporate reality of the Triune God Himself as love. The full knowledge that comes through the renewing of the divine life re-creates the ordained image of the One who created the corporate and incorporate reality of the church as the one new man (Col. 3:10). What is even more striking about Peter’s practical words concerning the progression of transformation into the same image and of being renewed unto the full

knowledge of the Lord, is his intrinsic understanding that transformation and renewing are intimately related to the kingdom. In 2 Peter 1:10-11 he charges the brothers:

Be the more diligent to make your calling and selection firm, for doing these things you shall by no means ever stumble. For in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly and bountifully supplied to you.

Our calling is related to image and dominion, and it is realized and manifested through our entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord. *Eternal kingdom* refers to the kingdom of God,

which was given to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Dan. 7:13-14) and which will be manifested at His coming back (Luke 19:11-12). It will be a reward to His faithful believers, who pursue the growth in His life unto maturity and the development of the virtues of His nature that in the millennium they may participate in His kingship in God’s glory (2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 20:4, 6)...

As the divine life grows within regenerated humanity, the economical processes of transformation, renewing, and conformation progressively express the being of God in all His attributes and virtues by manifesting the image of Christ in the church as the Body of Christ. This progressive manifestation of the image of Christ is the coming of the kingdom.

The bountiful supply that we enjoy in the development of the divine life and divine nature (vv. 3-7) will bountifully supply us a rich entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord. It will enable and qualify us to enter into the coming kingdom by all the riches of the divine life and divine nature as our excellent virtues (energy) unto the splendid glory of God. This is not merely to be saved but, after being saved, to pursue the growth and maturity in the divine life and thereby receive the kingdom reward. (Recovery Version, 2 Pet. 1:11, notes 1 and 2)

Our calling and selection to enter into the eternal kingdom, which is given to us according to the Father’s good pleasure (Eph. 1:5; Luke 12:32; Gal. 1:15-16), is equal to our predestination to be “conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom. 8:29).

Conformation is the end result of transformation. It includes the changing of our inward essence and nature, and it also includes the changing of our outward form, that we may match the glorified image of Christ, the God-man. He is the prototype and we are the mass

production. Both the inward and the outward changes in us, the product, are the result of the operation of the law of the Spirit of life (v. 2) in our being. (Recovery Version, v. 29, note 3)

In the consummate expression of God's economical process to bring us into the coming kingdom, we will not only be renewed inwardly according to the image of God, but we will also bear the image of God outwardly in our glorified bodies. This is our inheritance of God's incorruptible kingdom. In 1 Corinthians 15:49-50 Paul declares, "Even as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly. Now this I say, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, neither does corruption inherit incorruption."

As a part of Adam, we have borne the earthy man's image through birth; as a part of Christ, we will bear the heavenly man's image in resurrection. This indicates that just as in Adam we have been born as those who are earthy, so in Christ we will be resurrected as those who are heavenly. Such a resurrection is our destiny. It is as sure as our birth and should never be questioned. (Recovery Version, v. 49, note 1)

Although the overarching focus of 1 Corinthians 15 is the matter of resurrection, the line of the kingdom runs throughout the chapter. Through Christ as the firstfruits of resurrection and through those who are His at His coming, the end will come, and then He will deliver up the kingdom to His God and Father, having abolished all rule and all authority and power, reigning until God puts all His enemies under His feet (vv. 23-25). Reigning with Christ is an inheritance to those who bear the image of the heavenly (vv. 49-50). For our entrance into the coming kingdom through our bearing of His image inwardly and for our bearing of His image outwardly, we need to be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, which is a matter of exercise to expand the dominion of God in the coming kingdom (v. 58).

Dominion in the Coming Kingdom

The exercise of dominion in the coming kingdom can be seen in the ministry of the incarnated Christ and in the expanded ministry of the corporate Christ, the church. In His earthly ministry in the days of His flesh (Heb. 5:7), the Lord exercised God's authority on earth, and in His heavenly ministry in His resurrection, the Lord has empowered the church to exercise His authority on earth by binding and loosing according to the will of God. The kingdom is coming only because Christ and the church incorporately express His image and exercise His dominion. In fact, since the kingdom is the realization and manifestation of God's image and dominion, the will of

God in heaven cannot be fully executed without the church bearing and testifying the image of God and exercising and executing the authority of God. Image and dominion, which come out of the divine life, are the intrinsic connection between the kingdom of God and the church.²²

In the days of His flesh, the incarnated Christ exercised God's authority on earth. As reflected in Psalm 8:4-6, the son of man, Christ, visited us by being incarnated, having been made a little lower than angels. Despite His lowly status as a man and even as a slave, He was crowned with glory and honor, and He ruled over the works of God's hands, controlling the elements of nature, healing diseases and sicknesses, giving sight to the blind, and even raising the dead. He also put the things of Satan under His feet, releasing many from the power of sin, casting out his demonic acolytes, plundering his house, and ultimately destroying him on the cross. All these displays of dominion extended the kingdom of God on the earth. In *The Kingdom of God* Martyn Lloyd-Jones succinctly summarizes the Lord's exercise of power in relation to the coming of the kingdom:

The kingdom of God comes, and came, with the very presence and power manifested by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself...The kingdom of God came when the Son of God was in this world. The kingdom of God is a manifestation of the power of God; a manifestation of the fact that God is superior to the elements of nature, that He is superior also to the devils and to everything that is evil. The kingdom of God is God's reign and when Christ was here on earth, and when He worked His miracles and manifested His marvelous powers, He said: "This is the kingdom of God." (57)

The Lord confirmed this truth when He informed the Pharisees that the "kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Luke 17:21). At that time, "The Savior as the kingdom of God was not within them but only in the midst of them (Recovery Version, note 2). The Lord also confirmed that He was the reality of the kingdom when He declared to His disciples that some of those who were standing with Him would by no means taste death until they saw "the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (Matt. 16:28). "This was fulfilled by the Lord's transfiguration on the mountain (17:1-2). His transfiguration was His coming in His kingdom. It was seen by His three disciples—Peter, James, and John" (Recovery Version, 16:28, note 1). In Mark's account of this conversation, the words *coming in His kingdom* are recorded as "having come in power" (9:1). This shows that an intrinsic component of the kingdom involves the exercise of power, the exercise of dominion, in the kingdom. It ultimately indicates that the kingdom is the realization and manifestation of dominion.

The Lord was the coming kingdom in His incarnation, but following His death and resurrection, His power and authority are now being transmitted to the church. This does not mean that the authority and dominion that the Lord has given to the church are something separate from Himself; rather, there remains a vital, linking transmission from the Head to His Body. But in this transmission there should be no doubt that the coming kingdom has been enlarged in the church through its exercise of His dominion and authority. The coming kingdom involves the enlargement of the incarnated Christ in the church through His death and resurrection, and it depends upon the church's exercise of God's authority on earth. Paul speaks of the church's knowing

the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the operation of the might of His strength, which He caused to operate in Christ in raising Him from the dead and seating Him at His right hand in the heavenlies, far above all rule and authority and power and lordship and every name that is named not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and He subjected all things under His feet and gave Him to be Head over all things to the church, which is His Body, the fullness of the One who fills all in all. (Eph. 1:19-23)

According to these verses, the church is now the focal point of the exercise of God's dominion, an exercise that can occur only within the authoritative realm of the kingdom. This enlarged exercise of the dominion of God through the church is indicated by the words *to the church* in verse 22.

To the church implies a kind of transmission. Whatever Christ, the Head, has attained and obtained is transmitted to the church, His Body. In this transmission the church shares with Christ in all His attainments: the resurrection from the dead, His being seated in His transcendency, the subjection of all things under His feet, and the headship over all things.

Toward us who believe (v. 19) and *to the church* indicate that the divine power, which includes all that the Triune God has passed through, has been installed into us once for all and is being transmitted into us continually, causing us to enjoy Christ richly and to have the proper church life as His Body, His fullness. (Recovery Version, v. 22, note 3)

The enlarged exercise of God's dominion through the church's experience of the transmission of the Lord's

power primarily involves binding and loosing the things in heaven through prayer and thereby bringing the will of God to the earth. This binding and loosing involves the church's using, in principle, the keys of the kingdom of the heavens that the Lord Himself gave to the church in Matthew 16:19: "I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of the heavens, and whatever you bind on the earth shall have been bound in the heavens, and whatever you loose on the earth shall have been loosed in the heavens." The term *the kingdom of the heavens* in verse 19 is used interchangeably for the word *church* in verse 18. "This is a strong proof that the genuine church is the kingdom of the heavens in this age. This is confirmed by Rom. 14:17, in which the kingdom of God is mentioned in obvious reference to the proper church life" (Recovery Version, Matt. 16:19, note 2). In the proper church life "the church people" can only bind or loose on earth "what has already been bound or loosed in the heavens" (Recovery Version, note 4). The connection between the heavens and the earth in these verses underscores the vital, linking transmission between the Head and the Body that Paul speaks of in Ephesians 1:22-23.

The Lord was the coming kingdom in His incarnation, but following His death and resurrection, His power and authority are now being transmitted to the church. This does not mean that the authority and dominion that the Lord has given to the church are something separate from Himself; rather, there remains a vital, linking transmission from the Head to His Body.

Conclusion

When the church through prayer binds what has been bound in the heavens and looses what has been loosed in the heavens, the church, as the new man on the earth, has a foretaste of the coming kingdom, because it is the coming kingdom through its realization and manifestation of God's eternal ordination that humanity would bear His image and exercise His dominion on earth. This dominion extends to every living creature, and it can affect every human event. This is not just an objective teaching—it is an experiential reality. In the fulfillment of our high calling for the gaining of our inheritance of the coming kingdom, may the Lord, as our ascended Head, truly teach us how to pray, both generally and specifically, for the coming of the kingdom and the fulfillment of God's eternal will on earth. **AFC**

Footnotes

¹For the fulfillment of God's will in a world that has been corrupted by sin and satanic chaos, both the need of God and

the need of the believers must be addressed. Consequently, at its primary level the Lord's prayer is directed toward the eternal purpose of God. At a secondary level it is directed toward the present condition of the believers. Matthew 6:9-10 begins with a declaration of God's need: "Your name be sanctified; Your kingdom come; Your will be done, as in heaven, so also on earth." Verses 11 through 13 address the believers' need: "Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." The concluding sentence at the end of verse 13 reaffirms that the kingdom, which manifests God's image in glory and His dominion in power, is the great goal of God's heart's desire: "For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." Even in our world, which is corrupted by sin and satanic chaos, God's need must come first, but in order to meet this need, we as believers must be supplied with the divine life that comes from Christ as the bread of life (John 6:48; Matt. 4:4), must be sustained by the fellowship of the divine life in the Body of Christ through confession and forgiveness (1 John 1:7-9; Mark 11:25; Col. 3:13), and must be delivered from temptation and from the evil one by the covering of God as our armor (Eph. 6:11-13). Based on God's need, there is a divine operation to meet our need so that God's need can be affirmed through its accomplishment on earth as it is in heaven.

²Just as image and dominion cannot be separated from one another, they cannot be separated from the coming kingdom, because the kingdom is the realization and manifestation of God's image and dominion. The inseparability of image and dominion in the context of the kingdom can be seen in the Lord's utterance in Matthew 6:9-13. The Lord begins by praying for the Father's name to be sanctified and then for the kingdom to come, which is a prayer that the Triune God's image would be manifested through the exercise of dominion in the kingdom, and He ends the prayer by speaking of the power of the kingdom's dominion, which will display the glory of His image forever.

³This point is stressed in the *Life-study of Matthew* by Witness Lee:

Matthew presents the facts of history in an order different from that found in Mark or John. Mark and John were written according to the sequence of history. The arrangement of the facts in Matthew's record, however, is not according to history, but according to doctrine, because Matthew presents to us the doctrine concerning the kingdom. Thus, Matthew does not care for historical sequence; he cares for doctrinal sequence. (543)

⁴It should not come as a surprise that a minister, while uttering the word of God, may not have a full grasp of the totality of the revelation contained in the words that he is speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Seeing as we do in a mirror obscurely (1 Cor. 13:12), God does not require full comprehension from His ministers, but He does require fidelity to the word that He has given to the minister to speak. This is in contrast to those who would twist the word (2 Pet. 3:16). If a

minister's words are limited to his comprehension or even his experience, the minister will limit the word of God. Many of the points of doctrine related to the kingdom are presented in chapters subsequent to John's beheading in Matthew 14, including the Lord's initial association of the kingdom of the heavens with the church in Matthew 16. Consequently, it is doubtful that John's comprehension of the coming kingdom was either full or complete. This point is also strengthened by the Lord's word in Matthew 11:11: "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." This is because those who are in the kingdom of the heavens see more of Christ and are closer to Christ. Witness Lee comments on this verse:

Although John saw the incarnated Christ and introduced Him to people, he did not have the resurrected Christ indwelling him. The kingdom people do. John could say only, "Here is Christ," but the kingdom people can say, "To me, to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). Hence, the least in the kingdom of the heavens is greater than he. Whether a person is greater or lesser depends on his relationship to Christ. Christ is the deciding factor. The closer one is to Christ, the greater one is. (Recovery Version, note 1)

⁵When the intrinsic connection between the person of Christ and the kingdom is not clearly seen, it is easy to misinterpret verses that could otherwise be easily understood. These misinterpretations tend toward the outward and objective. For example, Philip Mauro's book *The Gospel of the Kingdom with an Examination of Modern Dispensationalism*, which contains many commendable points related to the kingdom, explains the Lord's word to His disciples in Matthew 16:28 as a prophecy that was fulfilled at Pentecost with the coming of the Spirit in power and with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. As such, he misses its obvious fulfillment with the Lord's subsequent transfiguration on the mountain:

Three of the Gospels record a prophecy of Christ concerning His Kingdom, which, by His express word, was to be fulfilled *in the lifetime of some who heard it*. This is Mark's record of it:

"Verily I say unto you, that there be some of them that stand here *which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power*" (Mark 9:1).

Matthew records the same prediction, but with a slight variation of language, the time of the predicted event being stated thus: "Till they see *the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom*" (Mat. 16:28). In Luke it reads: "Till they see *the kingdom of God*" (Luke 9:27).

Have we then the authentic record of any event happening *within that generation* that answers to this prediction?... Those two events were, *first* the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost; and *second*, the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Jewish nation by the Romans in A.D. 70. (192)

⁶In the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the call to prepare the way of the Lord is not directly attributed to John. Instead, it is presented as an editorial aside, pointing to the fulfillment of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “This is he who was spoken of through Isaiah the prophet” (Matt. 3:3); “even as it is written in Isaiah the prophet” (Mark 1:2); and “as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet” (Luke 3:4). The utterances concerning preparing the way of the Lord are directly attributed to John the Baptist only by the apostle John in his Gospel: “He said, I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord!’ as Isaiah the prophet said” (1:23). Shortly after uttering these words, the apostle John, also through the words of John the Baptist, reveals that the way of the Lord involves not an outward king but a Lamb: “The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (v. 29). The fact that the apostle John attributes both utterances to John the Baptist suggests that by the time of the writing of the Gospel of John, the apostles were much clearer concerning the relationship between the kingdom of the heavens and the process that brings in the kingdom, including the incarnation of Christ as a man, a creature, a Lamb; the death of Christ, the Lamb, on the cross as a sacrifice for sin; and the resurrection of the Lamb to experientially apply the taking away of sins for all those who believe. Only in the Gospel of John, the last Gospel to be written, is there a reference to the Lord as the Lamb of God in the accounts involving John the Baptist. This is not to suggest that the apostle John put words into the mouth of John the Baptist, but that under the inspiration of the Spirit, the apostle John understood the significance and connection between John the Baptist’s two utterances and included them in his Gospel account.

⁷*Hidden within His human nature* is used here in a descriptive sense rather than in a formal theological sense. Reading this phrase according to the latter sense might lead one to think that the divine and human natures in the person of Christ were separate and distinct, as if His humanity was a mere container for the divine life. But the divine life and nature and the human life and nature were thoroughly mingled in the person of Christ. They were distinct but not separate. The divine life and glory were hidden to most, precisely because His mingled natures were embodied in One who bore the likeness of men, in One whose mingled living was in fashion as a man (Phil. 2:7-8).

⁸The following section can only briefly speak to the role of the apostles in their development and advancement of the coming kingdom. But this role is an incorporate one: the apostles live and move in the Triune God, and the Triune God lives and moves in the believers as the Body of Christ. Consequently, the Lord’s word that He would build the church should not be

regarded as a work apart from His incorporation in the character and service of the apostles. Kerry S. Robichaux’s articles on incorporation in previous issues and in this one speak to the role of the apostles in much greater detail, and I would encourage all to read them.

⁹The divine seed of the kingdom was first planted in the perfect humanity of the incarnate Christ, and following His resurrection, it was planted in the redeemed humanity of the believers.

¹⁰In his written Epistle, his teaching, to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul prayed that the believers would be given a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Him, that they would know what is the hope of His calling (1:17-18). And after revealing the economy of the mystery, which once was hidden from other generations, and the stewardship of the grace of God, which imparted God as the contents of His economy, the apostle Paul prayed that the Father of glory would grant the believers to be strengthened to inwardly experience all the riches of Christ and be built up into an expression of the fullness of God (3:9, 2, 4-5, 14-19).

¹¹This is a central question that Paul Rowntree Clifford

In Matthew 6:9-13 the Lord begins by praying for the Father’s name to be sanctified and then for the kingdom to come, which is a prayer that the Triune God’s image would be manifested through the exercise of dominion in the kingdom, and He ends the prayer by speaking of the power of the kingdom’s dominion, which will display the glory of His image forever.

addresses in *The Reality of the Kingdom*. He writes, “If it is claimed that the kingdom of God was in fact established on earth by the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, this question arises: How can this possibly make sense or even be believable in the kind of world in which we live?” (65). His answer is unconvincing and amounts to little more than a call for social activism from a Christian perspective:

The kingdom of God has to do with the whole created order: with our stewardship of natural resources, with all forms of life on this planet, as well as with the structures of human society...The gospel of the kingdom is about the transformation of the whole created universe and therefore is the touchstone by which all human decisions in the body politic are to be assessed. (132-133)

¹²With the words *soil* and *seed* I allude not only to the organic terms and images utilized by the Lord and the apostle Paul (Matt. 13:24, 37; Mark 4:26; 1 Cor. 3:9) but also to the clear words of John in his Gospel concerning being born of the Spirit: “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit (3:6).

¹³For the most part throughout this article, when I refer to

church, my reference point is to the church as the reality of the kingdom of the heavens rather than to the church that only outwardly bears the appearance of the kingdom of the heavens, as distinguished in the chart and footnote on page 40.

¹⁴Even the mind of a believer can be veiled from a true understanding of the kingdom, especially if the operation of the divine life in the economy of God has been hindered, and one's fallen mind has not been at least partially renewed. When an unrenewed mind is the source of teaching, there is great possibility of error and even heresy. This tendency toward error and heresy is evident in Paul Rowntree Clifford's glaringly shortsighted discussion of the Lord's understanding of His role in the divine economy, especially in His incarnated status as a God-man who was carrying out His divine commission to bring in the kingdom. Clifford writes,

It seems that during his lifetime he shared the cataclysmic expectations of a transformation of the human scene that were preserved by the first-century Christians in their looking to a coming Day of the Lord...What seems reasonably clear is that Jesus did not know what the outcome of his ministry was going to be, and that, insofar as he conceived it as the dramatically manifest reign of God and the end of the kingdoms of this world, he was wrong. And the church had gradually to come to terms with that. The vindication of Jesus was in the hands of God and was to take a form that he had no means of anticipating.

Some people may find it difficult to accept the fact that Jesus could be ignorant of the future course of events or even mistaken in his expectations. That is due to a misunderstanding of what the church has held to be the doctrine of the Incarnation. One of the major heresies which tradition has rejected is that in Jesus the divine nature replaced the human nature and that he was essentially God in the guise of a man. Orthodox Christian teaching is that he was fully human, subject to the kinds of limitations to which we are all subject—"God divinely human," in the words of the Christmas carol. And that means that he was limited by the particular culture and knowledge of the society into which he was born. To attribute omniscience to him would be to deny his humanity. (36-37)

Clifford, in effect, attributes common Messianic understanding of the kingdom to Jesus, and then, because this cataclysmic event did not occur, concludes that Jesus was simply wrong in His understanding. Clifford says this while avoiding the numerous New Testament references which show that Jesus had a profoundly different understanding of the kingdom than what was currently in vogue in the Jewish culture. Clifford also avoids the deep realization that the Lord had in regard to how the kingdom would come into being, that is, through His death and resurrection, which would release the divine life that could be imparted into those who believe.

In anticipation of an outcry in response to his attribution of

error to the Lord, Clifford seeks to justify his position by arguing that most Christians have an improper understanding of the doctrine of the incarnation, believing that God was incarnated only in the guise of a man, but was not fully human (thus, He could be omniscient). This teaching of the Docetists that denies the human nature of Christ is indeed a heresy, because Jesus was God manifested *in the flesh*, and in Him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead *bodily* (1 Tim. 3:16; Col. 2:9, emphasis mine). He was both complete God and perfect man, the mingling of divinity with humanity. Sadly, what Clifford then defines as "Orthodox Christian teaching," a teaching which he uses in support of his understanding of the incarnation, is anything but orthodox. Instead, it is just as heretical as the teaching of the Docetists which he denounces. His teaching goes to the opposite extreme of denying the divine nature in the person of Christ. This heresy, commonly catalogued as dynamic monarchism, asserts that Jesus was not God incarnate but merely a man who received divine power from God. It is indeed odd that Clifford would deny the divinity of Jesus and then approvingly refer to the words of a hymn that speaks of Christ as "God *divinely human*" (emphasis mine). The full chorus of this hymn says, "God in time, God in man, / This is God's timeless plan: / God will come, as a man, / Born himself of woman, / God divinely human" (Green). Clearly, Clifford compounds heresy with inconsistency and confusion.

¹⁵Paul speaks of receiving the believers in Romans 14 because it is a matter related to the genuine expression of the Body of Christ, not merely a matter of having proper individual relationships with various brothers and sisters who may be weak in the faith. This can be seen in his charge to "pursue the things of peace and the things for building up one another" (v. 19). It is in the oneness of the Body, tested and realized through receiving, that the Body of Christ is built up. When a believer receives another believer in the way of peace, that is, according to the genuine oneness of the Body of Christ, there is a building up of "one another"; that is, there is a mutual organic benefit for the one who receives and the one who is received. This is an experiential matter.

¹⁶The observation of these attributes is made difficult by the fact that often those observing lack these very attributes themselves. This accounts, for example, for the unrighteous appraisal that the righteous Lord was "a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34). Similarly, temporary appeasement or mollification can easily mask itself as peace, and joy can be circumstantially generated rather than intrinsically manifested.

¹⁷The operation of the Holy Spirit involves the spreading of the divine life from our spirit to our soul and ultimately to our body. In our spirit there is righteousness because our regenerated spirit is life because of righteousness (Rom. 8:10). In our soul there can be peace because our renewed mind will not think more highly of itself than it ought, and it will not allow us to despise our brothers (12:3; 14:10). Finally, the joy of the Lord is a strengthening to our body as we exult in His joy (Neh. 8:10).

¹⁸Many Christians, especially self-identified evangelicals, regard preaching the gospel to the whole inhabited earth as a necessary requirement that Christians must fulfill in order for the Lord to return. This is generally referred to as the “Great Commission,” and the underlying assumption behind it seems to be that the Lord will come back when the last sinner is saved. This view is summed up well by George Eldon Ladd in *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. When speaking of both Matthew 28:19 and 24:14, he comments that “both verses speak about the same mission: world-wide evangelization until the end of the Age” (126). He further states that the “Good News of the Kingdom of God must be preached, if you please, by the Church in all the world for a witness to all nations. This is *God’s* programme” (134). Finally, he connects world-wide evangelism with the completion of God’s plan and the coming of Christ: “When the Church has finished its task of evangelizing the world, Christ will come again” (135). The world-wide preaching of the gospel, however, will not end this age, because a gospel that preaches salvation from perdition alone is an insufficient precursor to the manifestation of a testimony of the kingdom. The gospel that must be preached for a testimony is the gospel of the kingdom. Our preaching must result in a testimony of the kingdom, and for this we need to preach the full salvation of God, and in this preaching, there must be the teaching of God’s economical dispensing of His divine life in order to bring the believers into the experience of the divine life that produces a testimony of Jesus. When there is a living testimony of Jesus that expresses God’s image and dominion on the earth and that cooperates with God in the heavens to cast His enemy out, a loud voice will declare, “Now has come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ” (Rev. 12:10), and only then will a strict timetable for the Lord’s return be activated. The “Great Commission” focuses on salvation, but there is also a need for power and the kingdom of God in order to have a proper testimony that will end this age.

¹⁹In many respects, the Bible reveals a universal conflict over whose image, God’s or Satan’s, will capture the heart of humanity and thus be worshipped and served by them. Humanity was created in God’s image, but through the fall, humanity changed the glory of the incorruptible God “into the likeness of an image of corruptible man” (Rom. 1:23). The severity of this affront to God is seen in the commandment that says,

You shall not make for yourself an idol [or, graven image], nor the form of anything that is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water beneath the earth. You shall not bow down to them, and you shall not serve them; for I, Jehovah your God, am a jealous God. (Exo. 20:4-5)

Despite these warnings in love, fallen humanity progressively was enslaved to worship and serve false images as proxies for Satan. The ultimate expression of Satan’s image is seen in the vision of the great image in Daniel 2:31-45. The great image of iron, clay, bronze, silver, and gold represents the ultimate expression of the power of Satan, the means for the increase of his dominion. But Daniel sees a battle in which

a stone was cut out without hands, and it struck the image at its feet of iron and clay and crushed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were crushed all at once, and they became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. (vv. 34-35)

When the stone cut without hands, representing Christ as the only true image of God, untainted by the workmanship or nature of fallen humanity, strikes the false image, the kingdom of Satan will be crushed and “a kingdom which will never be destroyed” will be raised up (v. 44). Christ, the stone, was cut on the cross by God (Zech. 3:9; Acts 2:23), and in His resurrection

The gospel that must be preached for a testimony is the gospel of the kingdom. Our preaching must result in a testimony of the kingdom, and for this we need to preach the full salvation of God and teach concerning God’s economical dispensing of His divine life in order to bring the believers into the experience of the divine life that produces a testimony of Jesus.

He became the foundation stone and cornerstone of the church (Isa. 28:16; Eph. 2:20), which is now growing into the kingdom of God to exercise His judgment on Satan by crushing him shortly (Rom. 16:20). The vision in Daniel represents the climax of the struggle between Satan with his image and power and God with His image and power. According to the faithful Word, the dream of Nebuchadnezzar is certain, and Daniel’s interpretation is trustworthy (Dan. 2:45). Hence, the image and dominion of God will certainly prevail.

²⁰As the kingdom of the heavens, the church is the focal point for the exercise of God’s authority on earth today in order to carry out His heavenly will. This is the strongest argument against the thought that the kingdom has been suspended until the coming age. If the kingdom of God can be suspended, then the will of God can be suspended, and if the will of God is suspended, then there will be no abatement of the satanic will. Philip Mauro strongly reacts to the notion of a suspended kingdom by stating, “Never was there from the lips or pen of that apostle [Paul] a hint or suggestion to the effect that the reign of Jesus Christ, which God had promised afore by His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, had been postponed to another era” (75).

²¹The word *image* first occurs in the Bible in Genesis 1:26 and 27 in the account of God's creation of man. The next time it occurs is in the account of the birth of Adam's son Seth, following the death of Abel and the banishment of Cain, in Genesis 5:3. This suggests that there is a strong relationship between sonship and image, and this is borne out by the remarkable similarity of the wording in verse 3 to the wording in Genesis 1:26: "Adam lived one hundred thirty years and begot a son in his likeness according to his image, and he called his name Seth." Clearly there is a connection between life, as it is expressed through sonship, and the biblical use of the word *image* in that image comes out of life as it is realized through the organic expression of sonship. The Bible also reveals a similar connection between life, as it is expressed through sonship, and the biblical use of the word *dominion* in that dominion also comes out of life as it is realized through the organic expression of sonship. This can be seen in 2 Samuel 7:13-14, when Nathan speaks concerning David's seed: "It is he who will build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he will be My son." Image and dominion come out of life, but this life is uniquely expressed in a relationship involving sonship. As sons of God, who have received a spirit of sonship through regeneration (Rom. 8:15) and who are being conformed to the image of His Son (v. 29), the believers have the innate capacity in life to express God's image and exercise His dominion. This is what a proper son does.

²²It is remarkable how easy it is to overlook the connection between the kingdom and the church. Some overlook it because the church does not seem to loom as large as the kingdom in the Bible, due to its unfolding revelation of the church. Philip Mauro, for example, writes,

Whereas *the Kingdom*—that is, the relation of the redeemed of the Lord to God's Anointed King—was the prominent theme of the preaching and teaching of the Lord Himself and of His apostles, the subject of *the Church* (that is, in the comprehensive and eternal sense of that word, not in the local sense) was not developed until the latter part of Paul's life; until in fact his active ministry was ended. For it was during his imprisonment in Rome that he wrote the Epistle to the Ephesians, in which that great truth is unfolded. Prior to that we have on the subject of the Church (in this all-inclusive sense) only the brief and unexplained statement of Christ, "On this rock *I will build My Church*; and the gates shall not prevail against it" (Mat. 16:18).

For the Church (in this broad sense, for we are not speaking at all of the local churches) belongs rather to *eternity* than to *time* (Eph. 5:27; Rev. 21:23); for it is as yet *unfinished*, being now in *process of formation*. Whereas the Kingdom belongs to the present; for Christ is reigning *now*. (253-254)

The unfolding nature of the revelation of the church does not obviate the connection between the church and the kingdom; rather, it explains it. The Lord did not speak of the church until

the disciples had a revelation of Himself as the reality of the kingdom and thus could apprehend, even in a rudimentary way, how the kingdom would come and the church would be built through His death and resurrection. To speak of the church prior to this time would have been to speak words beyond their comprehension. The fullest unveiling of the church comes in the ministry of the apostle Paul, especially in Ephesians. In this Epistle Paul clearly states that the church is built upon the foundation of the revelation given to the apostles and prophets in spirit (2:20). Such a revelation could come only after the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, which made the regeneration of the human spirit possible. This is the reason that the revelation, made known to the apostles and prophets in spirit, was not made known to the sons of men in other generations (3:3-5). It simply could not be made known without the enlightening that comes through the regeneration of the human spirit. While Mauro's inability to see the connection between the church and the kingdom is largely a matter of shortsightedness, Wolfhart Pannenberg's comments seem to reflect a willingness to take away the words in the Bible related to the church:

Certainly the Kingdom of God is not the Church. Indeed it is quite possible to conceive of the Kingdom of God without any Church at all. The Kingdom of God is that perfect society of men which is to be realized in history by God himself. In Revelation, Saint John the Divine envisions such a society in which there is no need for church or temple...It is clear that the Church is not to be equated with the Kingdom of God, nor vice versa. (76)

Mauro's shortsightedness is understandable; Pannenberg's is troubling.

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