

THE BUILDING OF THE CHURCH AS THE REALITY OF THE KINGDOM OF THE HEAVENS THROUGH THE HEAVENLY MINISTRY OF CHRIST IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

BY JOHN PESTER

In the mind of most believers and Christian teachers, the Gospel of Matthew is primarily a historical record of the earthly ministry of Christ. It begins with a historical genealogy, presents historical details of the ministry of Jesus Christ, climaxes with a historical account of His death and resurrection, and ultimately culminates with the Lord's charge to His disciples to historically advance the spread of the gospel, even to the end of the age. Such a view is not without basis, but it is shortsighted. The Gospel of Matthew, while speaking of historical events, is arranged according to doctrine;¹ that is, it is arranged in a particular way in order to emphasize a particular truth. The truth that is underscored in the Gospel of Matthew is the building of the church as the reality of the mysterious and hidden kingdom of the heavens on earth through the heavenly ministry of Christ. In Matthew Christ's heavenly ministry brings the divine will in heaven to earth—"Your will be done, as in heaven, so also on earth" (6:10)—and extends the divine authority in heaven throughout the earth, producing the kingdom of the heavens on earth in this age and in the coming millennial kingdom—"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and disciple all the nations" (28:18-19).

Although the Gospel of Matthew apparently presents the earthly ministry of Christ, it intrinsically, even mysteriously, focuses on the producing and building of the church as the kingdom of the heavens through the heavenly ministry of Christ. Prior to the initial public appearance of the incarnated King—Christ as the son of David, the son of Abraham—John the Baptist spoke of the kingdom of the heavens as having drawn near (3:2), and at the beginning of His public ministry, the Lord repeated the same words to emphasize the centrality of the kingdom of the heavens in His ministry (4:17). The kingdom of the heavens is also implicitly unveiled through parables and explicitly linked to the church in the aftermath of Peter's revelation of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Ultimately, the advancement of the kingdom of the heavens is the focus of the Lord's commission to the disciples. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew the progressive revelation of the kingdom of the heavens is not only emphasized but also associated with the heavenly ministry of Christ in its progressive development. The role of the heavenly ministry of Christ in the building of the church as the kingdom of the heavens is prefigured symbolically in the genealogy in chapter 1, detailed constitutionally in the Lord's speaking in chapters 5 through 7, linked integrally to the fulfillment of the parables depicted in chapter 13, referenced clearly in chapter 16, and initiated emphatically in chapter 28. From the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew to its conclusion, the building of the church as the kingdom of the heavens through the heavenly ministry of Christ is the doctrinal emphasis.

The Church as the Reality of the Kingdom of the Heavens

The church in its expression of the divine life and divine authority is mysteriously

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associated with the term *kingdom of the heavens* in the Gospel of Matthew. This term is not used in any other Gospel; rather, the more common term *kingdom of God* is utilized.² The kingdom of the heavens is associated with the church because the church is the realization of the kingdom of the heavens in Matthew. *Kingdom of the heavens* is a specific reference to a unique period of time in the rule of God's authority, distinct in its presence within the larger, universal realm of God's kingdom; it is a period defined by the influence and exercise of God's authority through the church during the church age and the coming millennial kingdom. The position of the church is in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:6), and the church brings the heavenly rule to the earth through the heavenly ministry of Christ. Witness Lee writes,

Kingdom of the heavens is a term used exclusively by Matthew, indicating that the kingdom of the heavens differs from the kingdom of God...the latter being mentioned in the other three Gospels. [See diagram, p 36.] The kingdom of God is God's general reign from eternity past to eternity future. It comprises eternity without beginning before the foundation of the world, the chosen patriarchs (including the paradise of Adam), the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, the church in the New Testament, the coming millennial kingdom (including its heavenly part, the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens, and its earthly part, the Messianic kingdom), and the new heaven and new earth with the New Jerusalem in eternity without end. The kingdom of the heavens is a specific section within the kingdom of God, a section composed only of the church today and the heavenly part of the coming millennial kingdom. Hence, in the New Testament, especially in the other three Gospels, the kingdom of the heavens, a section of the kingdom of God, is also called "the kingdom of God." In the Old Testament the kingdom of God, generally, already existed with the nation of Israel (21:43); the kingdom of the heavens, specifically, had still not come, and it only drew near when John the Baptist came (3:1-2; 11:11-12). (Recovery Version, Matt. 5:3, note 4)

Matthew uses *kingdom of the heavens* in three crucial places in his Gospel³—in the initial announcement of the gospel through John's ministry of repentance in Matthew 3, in the Lord's mysterious words concerning the reality, appearance, and manifestation of the kingdom in chapter 13, and in the Lord's plain words concerning building the church with the keys of the kingdom of the heavens in chapter 16. In each of these three places, the church, the extension of the crucified and resurrected Christ, is hidden within the broader context of Matthew's doctrinal narrative.

When John the Baptist spoke of the need for repentance because the kingdom of the heavens had drawn near (3:2), he was stressing more than just a need for individual repentance; he was stressing repentance as the prerequisite for entering into the kingdom of the heavens as the corporate realm of God's heavenly rule. The ultimate goal of John's ministry, even though not fully realized by him, was to produce the church by ushering people into the kingdom of the heavens through repentance. The church is implied in John's declaration because the church is composed of repentant and rebellious sinners, who have come under God's rule and authority and who are no longer under the authority of darkness as the offspring of vipers (Col. 1:13; Matt. 3:7). John's reference to the coming kingdom of the heavens is also more than just a reference to Christ as the coming King. In *The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: The Triadic Phrase in Matthew 28:19b*, Jane Schaberg positively and correctly associates the kingdom of the heavens with the person of Christ: "According to Matthew, the kingdom of heaven manifested itself in the person, words and deeds of Jesus with such force that the kingdom can be considered to be a present reality in Jesus' own day and in his afterlife" (25). John's speaking, however, involves much more than just referencing the person of the individual Christ in His earthly ministry; it also points to the enlarged Christ in the church in His heavenly ministry. This can be seen by the fact that the Lord Himself repeated at the beginning of His public ministry John's declaration that the kingdom of the heavens had drawn near—at a time when He Himself was present among humanity,

but the kingdom of the heavens was not yet present: "From that time Jesus began to proclaim and to say, Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near" (4:17). If the coming of the kingdom of the heavens referred only to Christ in His initial coming, then the Lord's words in verse 17 would not have been necessary and even would have been in contradiction to His actual circumstances.⁴ Thus, even for the Lord, the kingdom of the heavens was a larger reality, involving the church that would come into being following the completion of His earthly ministry through His death and resurrection, which would usher in the coming of the Spirit to baptize repentant sinners into the Body of Christ (3:11). John's reference to the coming Spirit is a further indication that the building of the church as the reality of the kingdom of the heavens is associated with the heavenly ministry of Christ.

The kingdom of the heavens is further associated with the church in the first six parables in chapter 13. These parables mysteriously unveil the inward reality of the church, the outward appearance of the church with its inward corruption, and the ultimate manifestation of the church as the kingdom of the heavens. In the parable of the sower, which speaks of the divine word as the inward reality and content of the church, the Lord spoke of "the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens" (v. 11). In the parables of the wheat and the tares, of the mustard seed, and of the leaven hidden in the meal, which speak of the outward appearance and inward corruption of the church, the Lord said, "The kingdom of the heavens has become like a man sowing good seed in his field" (v. 24), "The kingdom of the heavens is like a mustard seed" (v. 31), and "The kingdom of the heavens is like leaven" (v. 33). In the parables of the treasure hidden in the field and of the merchant seeking fine pearls, the Lord said, "The kingdom of the heavens is like a treasure hidden in the field" and "The kingdom of the heavens is like a merchant seeking fine pearls" (vv. 44-45). Although the church is not mentioned in this chapter, it is commonly recognized that these parables concern the church, and thus *kingdom of the heavens* is implicitly associated with the church when the Lord spoke of its heavenly nature, the corruption of its heavenly nature, and the manifestation of its heavenly authority. The nature of the church is produced by the living and operative word of God that is sown into the good hearts of repentant believers. As the seed of the word grows and challenges Satan's kingdom of darkness, the enemy sows false believers among the genuine believers, creating an outward appearance that is large in the eyes of the world but also leavened with evil and corrupting doctrines and sinful deeds. In spite of the enemy's efforts to ensnare the church in outward aggrandizement and in the pursuit of worldly influence, the Lord shields His church by hiding the genuine believers as precious building material for His church and by seeking and pouring out His all to gain the church as one fine pearl.

In chapter 16 the Lord spoke explicitly of the church, following Peter's pronouncement of the revelation that he had received from the Father: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). The Lord declared that this revelation was the rock upon which He would build the church (v. 18), indicating that the aim of the Father's revealing action is the building of the church, which the Lord would accomplish in the aftermath of His death and resurrection. It is interesting to note that the Lord's first reference to His death and resurrection in His earthly ministry was spoken in the context of His declaration that He would build the church, not in reference to His redemption: "From that time Jesus 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).

The Lord's word concerning building the church is immediately followed by a reference to the kingdom of the heavens: "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" (v. 19). The building of the church involves the cooperation of the disciples in their function as the

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corporate enlargement of the resurrected Christ through their exercise of the keys of the kingdom of the heavens (v. 19). The use of these keys relates directly to the producing of the church through the outpouring of the Spirit upon Jewish and Gentile believers. “According to history there were two keys. Peter used one on the day of Pentecost to open the gate so that the Jewish believers could enter the kingdom of the heavens (Acts 2:38-42), and he used the other in the house of Cornelius to open the gate so that the Gentile believers could enter (Acts 10:34-48)” (Lee, Recovery Version, Matt. 16:19, note 1). When the Lord first spoke of the church, He associated His building action with the disciples’ exercise of the keys of the kingdom of the heavens, indicating that the church and the kingdom of the heavens are synonymous realities. The disciples’ exercise of the keys of the kingdom of the heavens occurred after the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord, that is, during the time of the Lord’s heavenly ministry, not His earthly ministry. The disciples’ participation in the ongoing building of the church is an issue of Christ’s heavenly ministry.

The Building of the Church through the Heavenly Ministry of Christ

The heavenly ministry of Christ for the building of the church is central to but hidden within the Gospel of Matthew. It is in the background of many key passages. It is prefigured in the genealogy in Matthew 1. It is the enlivening process that produces the heavenly nature and the outward expression of the kingdom of the heavens as described in chapters 5 through 7. It is the impetus behind the fulfillment of the mysterious parables related to the church in chapter 13. It is the means by which the way into kingdom of the heavens is opened in chapter 16, and it is the focus of the commission initiated in time and committed to the disciples in chapter 28.

The Heavenly Ministry of Christ in the Genealogy in Chapter 1

Of the many extended passages in the New Testament, perhaps the most overlooked in terms of its significance is the genealogy of Jesus Christ in Matthew 1. Most commentators acknowledge it as proof that Christ is a descendant of David and a rightful heir to the throne, thus establishing His kingly credentials. This is accurate, but if verses 1 through 17 are considered merely as a genealogical record without further application to the larger message of Matthew—the producing and building of the church as the reality of the kingdom of the heavens through the heavenly ministry of Christ—much is missed. Embedded within these verses are references to the heavenly ministry of Christ and to the church as the issue of Christ’s heavenly ministry. The genealogy begins in verse 1 with a seemingly simple and innocuous statement: “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” If verses 1 through 17 are merely a historical account of Christ’s antecedents, then verse 1 seems extraneous to this point because David’s place of order in Christ’s genealogy is mentioned in verse 6: “Jesse begot David the king,” and Abraham’s place of order in Christ’s genealogy is mentioned in verse 2: “Abraham begot Isaac.” If verses 1 through 17 are merely genealogical in nature, then these subsequent references to David and Abraham would have been sufficient to establish Christ’s genealogical credentials. Even though verse 1 provides seemingly extraneous genealogical details, John F. Walvoord, in *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come*, sees no larger doctrinal application for their inclusion, stating, “The opening words, ‘The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham,’ are intended to provide an introduction to the genealogy, not to the book as a whole” (17). The introductory emphasis on Christ as the son of David and the son of Abraham, however, serves a broader purpose in unfolding Matthew’s doctrinal emphasis in his Gospel. This is confirmed by Matthew’s transposition of the order of Christ’s genealogical antecedents—speaking of David before speaking of Abraham. If the genealogy is merely historical in nature, it seems that Matthew would first want to indicate that Jesus Christ was a genuine Jew, a son of Abraham, before asserting that He was the rightful heir to the throne, a son of David.

A deeper understanding of Matthew's doctrinal transposition of David and Abraham can be found by examining the types of Christ that are revealed in the lives of David's son, Solomon, and Abraham's son, Isaac, both of whom, as sons, speak of the goal of Christ's heavenly ministry—the church.

Solomon is a type of Christ as the son of David, the One who inherits the throne and kingdom of David (2 Sam. 7:12-13; Luke 1:32-33). Solomon, as a type of Christ, did mainly two things: he built the temple of God in the kingdom (1 Kings 6:2) and spoke the word of wisdom (1 Kings 10:23-24; Matt. 12:42). Christ, in fulfilling this type, is now building the real temple of God, the church, in the kingdom of God and has spoken the word of wisdom. (Lee, Recovery Version, Matt. 1:1, note 3)

In the Old Testament David gathered the materials for God's building, but Solomon, his son, actually built the temple. David is a type of the suffering Christ in His earthly ministry (Psa. 69:7-9; cf. Rom. 15:3), whereas Solomon is a type of the building Christ in His heavenly ministry, the building Christ who is revealed in Matthew 16:18. The church that Christ is building is also revealed in the New Testament as the bride and counterpart of Christ, and thus Matthew affirms that Christ is the real Isaac who will receive His bride unto Himself (cf. Eph. 5:25-27).

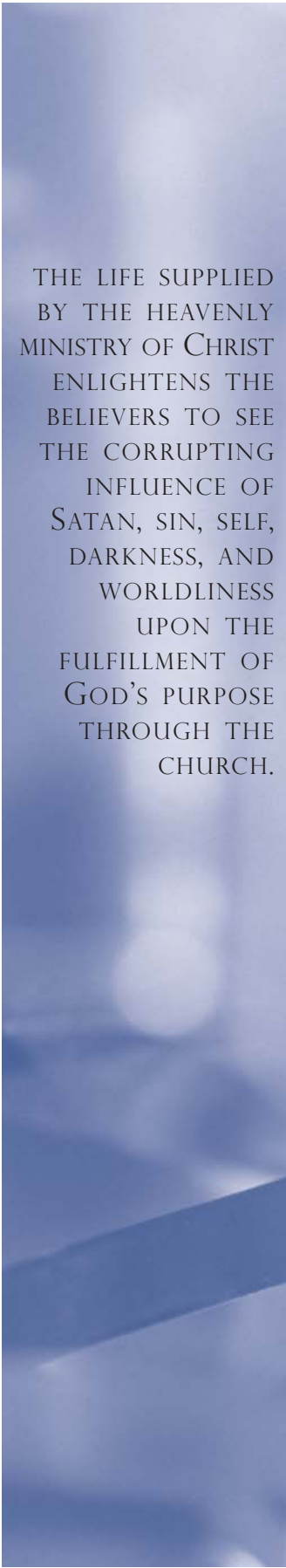
Isaac is a type of Christ as the son of Abraham, the One who inherits the promise and blessing God gave to Abraham (Gen. 22:17-18; Gal. 3:16, 14). Isaac also, as a type of Christ, did mainly two things: he obeyed his father even unto death and was resurrected from death (Gen. 22:9-10; Heb. 11:19), and he took Rebekah, a Gentile woman, as his wife (Gen. 24:61-67). Christ, in fulfilling this type, was put to death and offered to God and was resurrected from death, and He is taking the church as His bride out of the Gentiles. (Lee, Recovery Version, Matt. 1:1, note 4)

By considering Matthew's arrangement of these two types—speaking first of the son of David and then of the son of Abraham, thus alluding first to Solomon and then to Isaac—it is possible to understand Matthew's doctrinal transposition of the names of David and Abraham. With David's son, Solomon, Matthew points to the building of the temple as a type of the church, and with Abraham's son, Isaac, he points to the consummation of the building of the church—the bride of Christ. When the church as the bride has made herself ready (Rev. 19:7), Christ's building work in His heavenly ministry will be complete, and He will come as the Bridegroom in addition to being the ruling and reigning King. In Christ's fulfillment of the types of Solomon and Isaac, Solomon comes before Isaac, and thus, in the doctrinal stress of the genealogy in Matthew 1, David comes before Abraham. The fulfillment of both types occurs through the operation of Christ's heavenly ministry, because the building of the church as the temple and the perfecting of the church as the bride of Christ occur in the age of the church, following the completion of Christ's earthly ministry.

The Heavenly Ministry of Christ in the Constitution of the Kingdom of the Heavens in Chapters 5 through 7

In chapters 5 through 7 Matthew speaks of the operation of the heavenly ministry of Christ in the constitution of the kingdom of the heavens. This constitution involves both the inward nature of the kingdom people, the church, and the outward expression of the inward nature. Christ's heavenly ministry begins with the impartation of the divine, heavenly life, which was made available to redeemed humanity following the death and resurrection of Christ. In recognition of this initial experience, Matthew begins to detail the constitution of the kingdom of the heavens by presenting the Lord's word concerning the inward nature of the kingdom people, the nature contained within the divine life, in the first twelve verses of chapter 5. The Lord's word then progressively unveils the outward expression of this inward nature from verse 13 through 7:29.

WITH DAVID'S SON, SOLOMON, MATTHEW POINTS TO THE BUILDING OF THE TEMPLE AS A TYPE OF THE CHURCH, AND WITH ABRAHAM'S SON, ISAAC, HE POINTS TO THE CONSUMMATION OF THE BUILDING OF THE CHURCH—THE BRIDE OF CHRIST.



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The constitution of the kingdom of the heavens is composed of seven sections: the nature of the kingdom people (5:1-12); the influence of the kingdom people upon the world (5:13-16); the law of the kingdom people (5:17-48); the righteous deeds of the kingdom people (6:1-18); the dealing of the kingdom people with riches (6:19-34); the principles of the kingdom people in dealing with others (7:1-12); and the ground of the kingdom people's living and work (7:13-29). The first section, 5:3-12, depicts the nature of the kingdom of the heavens under nine blessings. It unfolds the kind of people who live in the kingdom of the heavens. The kingdom people must also exert an influence upon the world. The nature of the kingdom people, the very nature of the kingdom, exercises an influence upon the world. The kingdom people also have a law. This law is not the old law, the law of Moses, the ten commandments; it is the new law of the kingdom of the heavens. The kingdom people are those who perform righteous deeds and who have the proper attitude concerning material riches. Because the kingdom people are still on earth in human society, the constitution of the kingdom of the heavens reveals principles by which they deal with others. Finally, in the last section of this constitution we see the ground, the base, of the daily life and work of the kingdom people. All these aspects of the kingdom people are covered in the seven sections of the constitution of the kingdom of the heavens. (Lee, *Life-study* 162)

The heavenly ministry of Christ is the operative element in the believer's inward constitution and outward expression of the heavenly life of Christ. The first section, 5:1-12, which describes the inward nature of the kingdom people, begins with a reference to the poor in spirit participating in the kingdom of the heavens (v. 3) and ends with a reference to those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness also participating in the kingdom of the heavens (v. 10). None of the blessings in verses 3 through 10 can be obtained apart from a person's participation in the kingdom of the heavens, a participation that begins with a regenerated human spirit that can be poor and that ends with a willingness to suffer persecution in both the soul and the body. The heavenly ministry of Christ imparts the divine life that both regenerates and sustains the believers.

Following regeneration, the life supplied by the heavenly ministry of Christ enlightens the believers to see the corrupting influence of Satan, sin, self, darkness, and worldliness upon the fulfillment of God's purpose through the church, and thus there is mourning but also comfort (v. 4). Even though the kingdom people stand precariously in the midst of such an opposing environment, Christ's heavenly ministry imparts a meekness that enables them to willingly suffer this opposition (v. 5), a hunger and thirst for righteousness that counters this opposition (v. 6), and an empathetic ability to show mercy to the afflicted and suffering ones (v. 7). With a purity of heart, they see God in everything, and they become conduits of the arbitrating peace of Christ, with Christ Himself as their peace (vv. 8-9).

In the second section, verses 13 through 16, the influence of the kingdom people as salt upon the corruption of the world and as light in the midst of the darkness of the world is revealed. This salt and light come from the divine life that is imparted through the heavenly ministry of Christ. In this imparted divine life, there is light (cf. John 1:4), and this light shines and provides a countervailing restraint on the corruption present within the world. In the third section, Matthew 5:17-48, the law of the kingdom people, which can be upheld only through the operation of the heavenly ministry of Christ, is detailed. This inward law of life exposes in finer detail the negative propensities of fallen humanity related to anger, lust, the breaking of the ordinance of marriage, and falsely swearing, and it supplies a positive inclination toward generosity and love. All these principles involve actions while the church is "on the way" (v. 25), that is, while the church is under the exposing and supplying operation of the heavenly ministry of Christ. This section ends with the statement that the church under Christ's heavenly ministry will be perfect as the Father is perfect (v. 48),

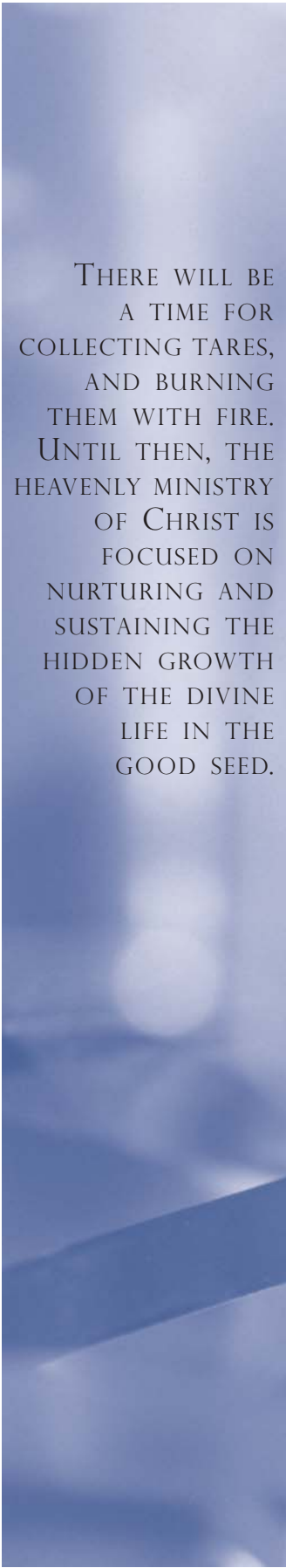
indicating that the Father's life, supplied through Christ, is the organic source for the church's participation in the kingdom of the heavens. Apart from the divine life, there is no avoidance of the negative tendencies exposed by the law of the kingdom people and no participation in its positive principles. In the fourth section, 6:1-18, the rule of the kingdom of the heavens is seen in the righteous deeds of the kingdom people related to giving alms and prayer. The prayer of the Lord in verses 9 through 13 is an example of prayer that is effectual in carrying out the heavenly ministry of Christ. It is a prayer that acknowledges the Father as the heavenly and holy source, that extends God's kingdom from the heavens to the earth according to the will of God, that acknowledges the need for a daily supply of the word of Christ and for constant forgiveness, that seeks deliverance from evil, and that displays the power and glory of the kingdom. Such prayer echoes the focus of Christ's heavenly ministry—the establishment of the kingdom of the heavens in power and glory on earth through the church's daily experience of the divine life of the Father, which enables the church to overcome every obstacle to the will of God through the quick acknowledgment of sin and the resolute avoidance of evil. In the fifth section, verses 19 through 34, the heavenly ministry of Christ enables the believers to overcome the power of mammon, and it assures the believers that the Father knows their true needs and will add these things to them as they pursue the kingdom.

In the sixth section, 7:1-12, the heavenly ministry of Christ produces an unhypocritical response toward others as the kingdom people encounter and deal with others, based on an accurate appraisal of their own true condition under the shining of the light in Christ's heavenly ministry. Instead of criticizing others, there is asking, seeking, and knocking in prayer for them. "To ask is to pray in a common way, to seek is to supplicate in a specific way, and to knock is to demand in the most intimate and most earnest way" (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 7, note 1). To ask, seek, and knock are possible only through touching the Lord's heart, which is received through His heavenly ministry. In the final section, verses 13 through 29, the ground of the kingdom people's living and work is seen as coming from an intimate knowledge of the Lord's desire—a knowledge received through His heavenly ministry—not from self-inflating works of power done seemingly for the sake of the Lord. When the constitution of the kingdom of the heavens progresses according to the Lord's speaking in chapters 5 through 7, the church's development is normal but largely hidden, but when the church fails to experience the heavenly life and nature that are imparted through the heavenly ministry of Christ, the church's development becomes abnormal and more visible.

The Heavenly Ministry of Christ in the Parables concerning the Church in Chapter 13

The unfolding development of the church as the kingdom of the heavens, in both its normal and abnormal aspects, is presented in the first six parables in chapter 13, and in each stage of its development, elements of the heavenly ministry of Christ are operative in the fulfillment of these parables. All commentators affirm that the parables in this chapter depict aspects of the church in the church age, following the conclusion of the Lord's earthly ministry. As such, these parables apply to the period of time associated with the heavenly ministry of Christ.⁵ Three parables speak positively of the church, revealing that its initiating source is the divine word of the kingdom (v. 19); that it is hidden in the world, thus concealing its value; and that it is a pearl of great value for which Christ was willing to sell all through His death on the cross. Three parables speak negatively of the development of the church, revealing that it contains both false and genuine believers in its outward appearance, that it grows abnormally large in its outward appearance, and that its outward appearance is corrupted inwardly with evil teachings and sinful deeds. In each of these first six parables the heavenly ministry of Christ plays a crucial role. The seventh parable concerning the

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GOOD SEED.

casting of the net covers the destiny of the world, following the completion of the heavenly ministry of Christ at the end of the age.⁶

In the parable of the sower, recorded in verses 3 through 9 and explained in verses 18 through 23, the divine seed of the word of God is sown on four kinds of earth, only one of which is good, producing fruit by a hundredfold, sixtyfold, and thirtyfold. The sower is the Lord in His heavenly ministry because the church was produced by the word that was spoken by the Lord through the apostles on the day of Pentecost and that has subsequently been sown throughout the centuries by the Lord through disciples of the kingdom. The seed of the word of the kingdom is sown liberally, indicating the breadth of God's love for humanity and the reach of His heavenly ministry, but it is received sparingly, pointing to the blinding efforts of the enemy and the narrowness and hardness of the fallen human heart (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4; 6:12; Eph. 4:18). Some seeds are snatched away by the evil one (Matt. 13:19), and some are unproductive because they are sown into hearts that cannot bear affliction or persecution and into hearts that are clouded by the anxieties of the age and the deceitfulness of riches (vv. 21-22). Nevertheless, the divine life that is imparted by the word conveyed through the heavenly ministry of Christ finds some good earth and begins to grow in order to produce the church.

In the second parable, recorded in verses 24 through 30 and explained in verses 36 through 43, the kingdom of the heavens is likened to a man sowing good seed in his field. The field is the world and the good seed produces a positive issue of the heavenly ministry of Christ—the genuine believers as the wheat. Because this wheat presents a direct challenge to the enemy, tares, that is, false believers who damage the testimony of the church, are sown among the genuine believers. In contrast to the natural inclination to immediately try to root out the tares (v. 28), the Lord in His heavenly ministry is willing to tolerate their presence because His focus is on the undisturbed growth of the good seed. Although the wheat and the tares are initially indistinguishable in appearance, the Lord trusts that the true divine nature of the wheat and the evil nature of the tares will be manifested through their respective growth. This speaks of a principle in the carrying out of Christ's heavenly ministry, a principle of not being involved in the vigilant rooting out of false believers in the church. It is easy to be judgmental and overzealous related to the things of God. The Lord knows this fallen tendency well, having been the focus and target of religionists who could not distinguish the Son of God from a gluttonous man and a drunkard (11:19), and He equally knows that genuine disciples will be killed by those who think that they are offering service to God (John 16:2). There will be a time for collecting tares, binding them into bundles, and burning them with fire, but it is at the end of the age, when only the manifested wheat is gathered into the barn. Until then, the heavenly ministry of Christ is focused on nurturing and sustaining the hidden growth of the divine life in the good seed.

In the third parable in Matthew 13:31-32, the goal of the heavenly ministry of Christ to produce food for God's people is supplanted and overshadowed by the growth of the church in its outward appearance. "The fruit of the wheat in the first two parables and the fruit of the mustard seed here in the third parable are for food. This indicates that the kingdom people, the constituents of the kingdom and of the church, should be like a crop that produces food for the satisfaction of God and man" (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 31, note 1). The heavenly ministry of Christ is not focused on establishing a great outward appearance to garner praise but on providing the nourishing element of God's life as a daily supply, a daily bread. However, as the church grew in its outward appearance through the introduction of the tares among the wheat, its nature and function were also corrupted.

The church, which is the embodiment of the kingdom, should be like an herb that produces food. However, its nature and function were changed, so that it became a "tree," a

lodging place for birds...This change happened in the first part of the fourth century, when Constantine the Great mixed the church with the world. He brought thousands of false believers into Christianity, making it Christendom, no longer the church...The mustard is an annual herb, whereas the tree is a perennial plant. The church, according to its heavenly and spiritual nature, should be like the mustard, sojourning on the earth. But with its nature changed, the church became deeply rooted and settled as a tree in the earth, flourishing with its enterprises as the branches in which many evil persons and things are lodged. This resulted in the formation of the outward organization of the outward appearance of the kingdom of the heavens. (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 32, note 1)

Buildings that inspire awe and outward devotion, works that ostensibly glorify the Lord but in reality glorify the worker more, and organizations that promote “spiritual” aims through worldly methods are telling signs of the enormity of the tree of today’s Christianity, much of which has little genuine worth in the building of the church as the reality of the kingdom of the heavens. Along with a hidden desire for greatness outwardly, there is also an inward element of evil doctrines and sinful things.

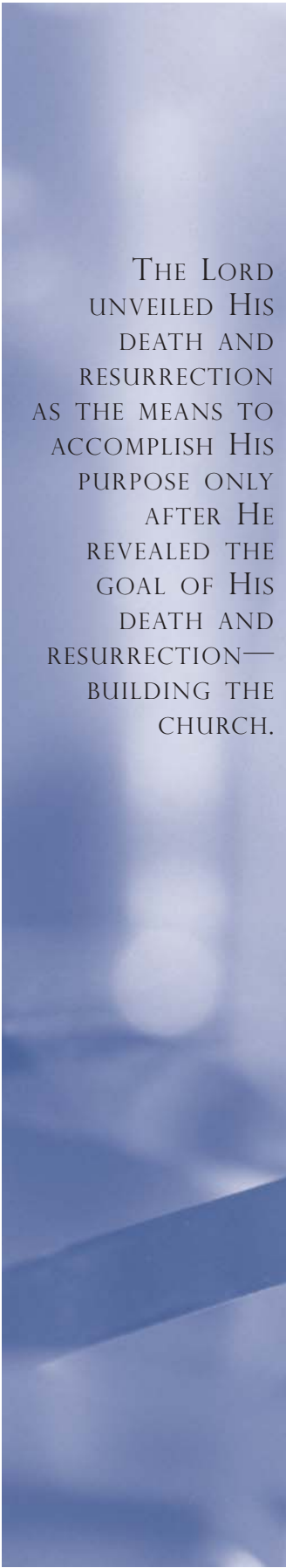
In the fourth parable in verse 33, the Lord spoke succinctly of the leavening influence of evil doctrines and sinful things in the midst of the execution of His heavenly ministry. This influence is so pervasive that it leavens “the whole.” *The whole* here does not refer to the inward content and reality of the church, because the church is being made glorious, without any spot or wrinkle (Eph. 5:27) and because the gospel that produces the church in Christ’s heavenly ministry brings life and incorruption to light (2 Tim. 1:10). In God’s eyes, there are no corrupting elements in the genuine church. *The whole*, therefore, must refer to the whole of the outward appearance of the church, the edifice of today’s Christianity. While the outward appearance of the church may evoke the regard of the world, it is of little value to the Lord. Rather than building a large outward manifestation of the church, the Lord is hiding the church in the world as His treasure and seeking redeemed humanity in order to build the church.

In the fifth and sixth parables in Matthew 13:44-46, the Lord likened the kingdom of the heavens to a treasure that a man hides in a field and to a merchant seeking fine pearls and selling all that he had in order to obtain the one pearl of great value. The heavenly ministry of Christ produces precious materials for the building of the church—the gold, silver, and precious stones in 1 Corinthians 3:12. The Lord’s hiding of these materials is part of His heavenly ministry to protect the church by not leading it into the temptations that come from seeking the acceptance and laudatory praises of the world. Just as the Lord in His earthly ministry was willing to go to the cross and sell all in order to gain the church, He is leading the believers, through His heavenly ministry, to lay down their soul life for the building of the church by filling up that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ (Col. 1:24). The willingness to lose one’s soul-life for the sake of the Lord is a proper response to receiving a revelation of the building of the church through the heavenly ministry of Christ (Matt. 16:24-25).

The Heavenly Ministry of Christ in the Revelation of the Church in Chapter 16

In Matthew 16 the Lord explicitly linked the revelation given to Peter from the Father—that He, Christ, is the Son of the living God, with His heavenly ministry to build the church as the kingdom of the heavens. In the other synoptic Gospels, there are accounts of Peter’s revelation (cf. Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21) but not with Matthew’s detail and not with the Lord’s subsequent speaking concerning the focus of His heavenly ministry—the building of the church as the kingdom of the heavens. This utterance, included only in the Gospel of Matthew, underscores Matthew’s emphasis on the heavenly ministry of Christ. When Peter declared, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16:16),

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Jesus answered and said to him, Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in the heavens. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and 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, 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. (vv. 17-19)

In this passage there are several indications that Christ's heavenly ministry is the backdrop for His speaking concerning the church. Here, in His first mention of the church, the Lord indicated that the building of the church is a coming development with the words *will build*. Walvoord speaks to this point by distinguishing between what occurred in the Lord's earthly ministry and what occurred after His ascension, essentially drawing a distinction between the Lord's earthly ministry and heavenly ministry: "The fact that Christ stated it as a future purpose indicates that His present ministry was not building the church...As H. A. Ironside expresses it, 'The building of this spiritual temple did not begin until after He had ascended to heaven, and the Spirit of God came as the promised Comforter'" (124). At the time of Peter's revelation, the building of the church was economically dependent upon the Lord's death and resurrection because it was through His death and resurrection that the divine life in Him could be released and imparted into the believers. Therefore, it is "from that time" that "Jesus 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). The Lord unveiled His impending death and resurrection as the means to accomplish His purpose only after He revealed the goal of His death and resurrection—the building of the church through His heavenly ministry and the apostles' exercise of the keys of the kingdom of the heavens. The Lord also spoke of the apostles' exercise of the keys of the kingdom of the heavens as a coming development with the words *will give*. Since the initiation of the building of the church as the kingdom of the heavens could take place only after the death and resurrection of Christ, which marked the end of His earthly ministry, the apostles' use of the keys to open the way into the kingdom of the heavens could occur only in the period of time accorded for Christ's heavenly ministry.

After speaking of the purpose of His heavenly ministry—the building of the church—and the initiation of His building through the church's exercise of the keys of the kingdom of the heavens, the Lord spoke of the believers' participation in His heavenly ministry through the denial of the soul-life: "If anyone wants to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his soul-life shall lose it; but whoever loses his soul-life for My sake shall find it" (vv. 24-25). Although the other synoptic Gospels do not include the Lord's word concerning the building of the church, they do include His words related to losing the soul-life in their account of Peter's revelation (cf. Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:23-24). Although the Lord is building the church and the way has been opened through His heavenly ministry, the believers' participation in this building and their entering into the opened way depend upon the denial of the soul-life, which is an experiential response to receiving the supply of the divine life in the heavenly ministry of Christ.

The ability to take up the cross and to deny one's soul-life is present only when the heavenly ministry of Christ is operative in the lives of the believers. Since unbelievers have only the fallen human life, there is no possibility that they can deny their soul-life, because that is all they have. Even the most ascetic unbelievers are still being ascetic in their fallen soul-life; they are not denying themselves but only denying themselves things, and even in their soulish, religiously focused denials, they are acting according to the life of their fallen soul. As believers, however, we have the divine life through regeneration in addition to our human life, and thus, the denial of our fallen soul-life is possible because we have another life that can replace our fallen human life

along with its soulish tendencies. Such a denial is imperative because nothing of the self can be in the church; there can be only the divine life of Christ. Consequently, the denial of the self that the Lord speaks of can occur only under the auspices of the operation of the divine life that is imparted and supplied through the heavenly ministry of Christ.

Without the heavenly ministry of Christ, we would remain in our fallen soul-life: we would shame the Father's name, not submit to the Lord's kingdom rule, shun the will of God, rely on the sustenance of the world, be unforgiving, and stray into temptation. However, with the riches of His grace abounding to us through His heavenly ministry, we can be to the praise of the glory of the Father's grace (Eph. 1:6-7), we can be subject to one another in the fear of Christ (5:21), we can participate in the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose by manifesting His multifarious wisdom (3:10-11), we can be filled in our spirit with the divine life as our daily sustenance (5:18), we can be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving (4:32), and we can avoid the unfruitful works of darkness (5:11). The denial of the self, along with the building of the church, and the exercise of the keys of the kingdom of the heavens are by a divine operation in the heavenly ministry of Christ, a ministry that was initiated by the Lord Himself and commissioned to His disciples as the consummating point in the Gospel of Matthew.

The Heavenly Ministry of Christ as the Disciples' Commission in Chapter 28

The Gospel of Matthew does not end with the Lord's ascension to heaven but with a commission to His disciples to carry out His heavenly ministry by going throughout the earth to disciple the nations by baptizing them into the reality of the name, the person, of the Triune God. The church is a divine reality in the Triune God; it is the economical enlargement of the Triune God through the organic identification of redeemed and regenerated believers with the crucified and resurrected Christ. The church is in the Triune God, and this union, although mysterious, can manifest the reality of the Triune God to the nations. The reality of our union with the Triune God and the Lord's commission in Matthew 28 that this reality be manifested through the church are reflected in the Lord's prayer in John 17:21-23:

That they all may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that You have sent Me. And the glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, even as We are one; I in them, and You in Me, that they may be perfected into one, that the world may know that You have sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.

The church is in the Triune God, and the Triune God is in the church. The enlargement of the expression of the Triune God through the church is the aim of the heavenly ministry of Christ. This commission is supported by the authority in heaven and on earth that has been given to Him (Matt. 28:18). This authority is spread through the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom to the whole inhabited earth for a testimony to all the nations (24:14), and this authority accompanies the believers in their discipling of the nations as the Lord carries out His heavenly ministry with them and in them, even to the consummation of the age (28:20).

Conclusion

Matthew's presentation of the heavenly ministry of Christ begins with the genealogy of Christ in chapter 1, which points to Christ as the fulfillment of the types of Solomon and Isaac: This Christ is the building Christ and the cherishing and nourishing Bridegroom. He is building the church and preparing His bride through His heavenly ministry. In the building and preparing work presented in chapters 5 through 7, He is constituting

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His kingdom people with His nature, the inward laws of His life, His righteous deeds, His values, and His actions toward others. This constitution is the issue of the operation of the heavenly ministry of Christ in the church. Three positive and three negative responses to His constituting ministry in this age are presented in the parables in chapter 13. Positively, the divine word that is sown through His heavenly ministry finds good ground, producing precious materials for His building that are shielded from the influence of the world and thus gaining the church as a precious inheritance. Negatively, false believers are sown among the genuine believers to dilute and damage the testimony of the church, the church is distracted by considerations of grandeur, and the church is tarnished by inwardly corrupting doctrines and sinful deeds. However, there is nothing, not even the gates of Hades, that will ultimately deter the heavenly building ministry of Christ as revealed in chapter 16, ensuring that Christ's commission related to His heavenly ministry in chapter 28 will be carried out and consummate this age. From beginning to end, the Gospel of Matthew speaks of the building of the church as the reality of the kingdom of the heavens through the heavenly ministry of Christ. **LFC**

Notes

¹The Gospel of Matthew is not a book of history, but a book of doctrine. Matthew puts together certain historical facts for the purpose of revealing a doctrine. If you compare the four Gospels, you will see that 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. (Lee, *Life-study* 543)

²The term *kingdom of God* is used fourteen times in the Gospel of Mark, thirty-two times in the Gospel of Luke, and two times in the Gospel of John. It is also used four times in the Gospel of Matthew: in 12:28; 19:24; 21:31; and 21:43. Apart from matters related to the particular authority of the church as the kingdom of the heavens, each of these four verses reference matters that speak to the opposition against even the general establishment of God's authority, God's kingdom as a whole, including the opposing influence of demonic spiritual forces (12:28); the opposing influence of riches (19:24), and the opposing influence of religion (21:31, 43). In regard to 12:28, Witness Lee also notes, "The kingdom of God, not the kingdom of the heavens, is indicated here. Even at that time the kingdom of the heavens still had not come. The kingdom of God, however, was there already" (Recovery Version, note 2), and in regard to 19:24, he similarly notes, "Verse 23 uses *kingdom of the heavens*, but here [verse 24] *kingdom of God* is used. At this point the kingdom of the heavens had not come, but the kingdom of God was there. Hence, the Lord used the term *kingdom of God*" (Recovery Version, v. 24, note 2).

³There are other references to the kingdom of the heavens in other chapters in Matthew, but the relationship between the kingdom of the heavens and the church can be sufficiently demonstrated with the verses in chapters 3, 13, and 16.

⁴Some argue that the Lord's word concerning the kingdom of the heavens drawing near refers to the coming of the millennial kingdom at the time of the Lord's second coming, and thus, it was not inaccurate for Him to say that the kingdom of the heavens had drawn near in Matthew 4:17. On the surface this may seem plausible, but if it is blindly accepted, much of the unfolding revelation in the Gospel of Matthew is undercut. If the kingdom of the heavens that the Lord spoke of is only in the future, then the constitution of the kingdom people, as described in Matthew 5 through 7, cannot be a present reality, the parables in Matthew 13 must be applied to something other than the church in the present age, and the exercise of the keys of the kingdom of the heavens in chapter 16 also has no present application. The simpler explanation is that the Lord spoke of the kingdom of the heavens drawing near because He had not yet passed through death and resurrection, the process that produced the church as the realm of the reality of the kingdom of the heavens. The church was ever in His view when He spoke of the kingdom of the heavens.

⁵Some interpret all these parables in a positive light, whereas others see some negative aspects. Of the six parables concerning the church in chapter 13, the parables of the sower, the treasure hidden in the field, and the merchant seeking fine pearls are positive indications of the divine source and value of the church in the eyes of God. The parable of the tares being sown among the wheat is commonly acknowledged as depicting a negative development in the history of the church. In interpreting the two remaining parables, the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the woman mixing leaven into three measures of meal, however, some commentators view the parables positively, and others negatively.

Concerning the parable of the mustard seed, John MacArthur, Jr., in *The Parables of the Kingdom* states positively, “Just like a little mustard seed has the potential to become a massive bush, so does the small beginning of the kingdom have the potential for a kingdom that extends to the ends of the earth” (75). Though the parable speaks of the transmogrification of this seed, from its ordained status as an herb providing nourishment, to a large tree providing shelter for evil birds of heaven, MacArthur finds a positive interpretation even of this, saying, “The kingdom of Christ (the mustard bush) is going to grow so big that the nations find their shelter and protection in it. The birds in the mustard bush are not necessarily a part of the kingdom; they just benefit by its presence on earth” (78). While the church surely has a salting influence upon the world, as seen in Matthew 5:13, it is never regarded in the Word as a source for the shelter and protection of the world itself, a world that lies in the evil one (1 John 5:19). Rather, it is the church that needs the sheltering protection of the Lord in the midst of persecution by the world. MacArthur’s enthusiasm, while commendable in its intent, is simply misplaced. This misplaced enthusiasm is also present in C. H. Spurgeon’s interpretation of this parable in *The Gospel of the Kingdom: A Popular Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew*. He states,

The results of the divine life in the soul are by no means little; but great graces, great projects, and great deeds are produced by it. The work of grace in the church and in the individual, is so apparent, that persons who know as little about heavenly things as linnets and sparrows, come and find shelter beneath the holy and beneficent influences and institutions which are its outgrowth. (104)

Behind both these interpretations, there is a subtle desire for the church to be recognized and lauded for its massive and great projects and deeds, but this ignores the depiction of the church being small and hidden in the parable concerning the treasure hidden in the field of the world. In the outworking of God’s plan, smallness is not a detrimental factor, because greatness was never the aim of the withdrawing Christ, who did not seek His own glory. Even the incarnated God Himself gained only one hundred twenty disciples during the three and a half years of His earthly ministry. There is no need for greatness in the eyes of the world to validate God’s operation in the church.

Concerning the parable of the woman adding leaven to three measures of meal, MacArthur also provides a positive interpretation, ignoring the Old Testament admonitions related to the use of leaven (Exo. 12:15, 20) and even the New Testament association of leaven with evil and sinful things in the church: “Let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor. 5:8). He writes, “When you plant the kingdom of heaven [leaven] in the middle of the world, it will eventually influence it, because inherent in the kingdom is a bubbling, fomenting, supernatural power. I believe the leaven represents the good influence of Christ’s kingdom—His gospel and His people—in the world” (89). MacArthur bases his positive interpretation solely upon the physical properties of leaven, which makes bread “soft, spongy, and tasty” (88); he ignores the biblical assessment of leaven. In *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come*, Walvoord, however, regards the leaven in this parable as evil things that negatively influence the church; he does not see it as a fomenting power that positively influences the world:

In the parable, the meal represented that which is good, as it was made from wheat and not from tares. The professing church, however, is permeated by evil doctrine, externalism, unbelief, and worldliness, which tend to inflate the church and make it larger in appearance, even as the leaven inflates the dough but actually adds nothing of real worth. The history of the church has all too accurately fulfilled this anticipation, and the professing

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church in the world, large and powerful though it may be, is permeated by the leaven of evil which will be judged in the oven of divine judgment at the end of the age. (103)

⁶[The six parables] related to the church are classified into three groups: the real and normal Christians, the overcomers; the real, yet abnormal Christians, the defeated ones; and the false Christians. At the time of the Lord's coming back, the false Christians, the tares, will be bound into bundles and cast into the furnace of fire, that is, into the lake of fire. That will be the destiny of the tares. The normal, real Christians, the overcomers, will be transferred into the manifestation of the kingdom to be co-kings with Christ. The abnormal ones will be put in a certain place to be chastened, disciplined, and punished. These six parables give us a clear view regarding the real Christians and the false Christians. The seventh parable, the parable of the net, covers the destiny of the worldly people. (Lee, *Life-study* 488)

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A CHART SHOWING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE KINGDOM OF THE HEAVENS AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

