

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

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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