

# THE CHURCHES AS THE KINGDOM OF GOD

BY JAMES FITE

The Acts of the Apostles, the second installment of Luke's narrative addressed to the God-loved Theophilus, opens with the actions and teachings of the resurrected Jesus concerning the kingdom of God (1:1, 3).<sup>1</sup> During the forty days between His resurrection and public ascension, Jesus "presented Himself alive..., appearing to them" (v. 3). Prior to His crucifixion Jesus promised His disciples that He would be in them as the Spirit (John 14:17, 20; cf. 7:38-39), and after His resurrection Jesus came to the disciples and breathed Himself into them as the Spirit (20:19, 22). Having been with the incarnated Lord in the flesh for three and a half years, the disciples were accustomed to His visible presence. But after His resurrection they needed a forty-day training period to learn to know Him, live with Him, and follow Him according to His invisible presence. Hence, in these forty days Jesus repeatedly appeared and disappeared until the disciples were assured that He was with them "all the days" (Matt. 28:20; cf. 1:23; 18:20). The Lord's word to Paul in Acts 18:10, "I Myself am with you," further indicates that the Lord's invisible presence is the portion of all of the Lord's followers, including the disciples who came to know Him after His resurrection and ascension.<sup>2</sup>

When the Lord appeared to them, He spoke of things concerning the kingdom of God. The Lord not only demonstrated to His disciples that He is the resurrected and indwelling One living in and through them; He also specifically instructed them concerning the kingdom of God. The theme of the kingdom is echoed in the final verse of Acts, which concludes with Paul "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, unhindered" (28:31). Acts 1:3 and 28:31, as the introduction and conclusion—the bookends of Acts—confirm that the Lord Jesus Christ and His kingdom are the main theme of this book.<sup>3</sup> In *Life-study of Acts* Witness Lee more fully identifies the subject of Acts as being "the propagation of the resurrected Christ in His ascension, by the Spirit, through the disciples, for the producing of the churches—the kingdom of God" (9). This statement associates the kingdom of God with not only the church universally but also the churches locally. It appositively relates *churches to the kingdom of God*, highlighting the equivalence of the churches to the kingdom of God as an integral theme of Acts.

## The Kingdom of God in the New Testament

*The kingdom of God* is a ubiquitous term in the New Testament. It appears in the Gospels and throughout the other books of the New Testament and often in connection with the church. Significantly, when the church is first mentioned in the New Testament, the Lord, who introduced the term (Matt. 16:18), associated it with the term *the kingdom of the heavens* (v. 19). The next reference of the Lord to the church is in 18:17. Here *the church* refers to its local expression and practice because the context is that

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an offended brother is needing to seek resolution for an offense by bringing it to the attention of the church. It is in the practical aspect of a local church's governance and experience that a nexus between the churches and the kingdom of God can be established. Depending on the context in the New Testament, *church* may refer to either the universal church (cf. Eph. 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23-25) or the local church (cf. Acts 8:1; 20:17; Rev. 2:1). However, the term *churches* always refers to local churches (1 Cor. 16:1, 19), that is, local expressions of the universal church that are practically manifested in localities, cities. The term *churches*, the plural form of *ekklesia*, refers to practical and local aggregations of believers, and it is first used in Acts 15:41.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Kingdom of God in the Gospel of Luke*

Luke 4 marks the beginning of the ministry of the Lord, and the kingdom of God is the subject and content of the good news, the *evangelion*, that Jesus preached and sent forth His disciples to preach (v. 43; 8:1; 9:2, 60; 16:16). In chapter 8 Jesus opened “the mysteries of the kingdom of God” (v. 10) to the disciples by interpreting the parable of the seed and the sower (vv. 5-8). The seed is the word of God (vv. 10-11), that is, the word of the gospel that is sown into “a noble and good heart” (v. 15), enabling the recipient to “believe and be saved” (v. 12; Acts 8:4). The subjective and experiential implication is that within the seed of the word is the Lord Himself as the life. In Luke 11 the Lord taught the disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come” (v. 2). In verse 20 He stated that the kingdom of God came when He cast out demons by “the finger of God.” In the parallel passage in Matthew 12:28, Jesus said that the kingdom of God came when He cast out demons “by the Spirit of God.” This indicates that the power of the kingdom of God is the Spirit of God, and where the kingdom of God is, the demons have no ground. In Luke 17 the Pharisees were looking for a material and visible political order that would come “with observation” (v. 20) instead of recognizing that the kingdom of God was actually the very person of the Son of Man who was before them (vv. 21-24).

Luke portrays the kingdom God as a central theme that should be proclaimed as the Gospel. This proclaiming is not mere admonition or doctrinal teaching but a planting or dispensing of the word of God as an organic element into the hearts of men. The organic aspect of this kingdom is already here in reality but not yet fully manifested; hence, ongoing prayer is needed for His kingdom to come both inwardly in reality and eventually outwardly in manifestation. In the context of the Gospel of Luke, the kingdom seed is related to the Triune God, that is, to the word of God, the person of the Son of God, and the Spirit of God. Human cooperation is needed for this seed to become rooted, grow unto maturity, and ultimately bear fruit. This fruit is both an expression of the riches of the divine life of the Triune God and a realm, the kingdom of God, in which God's authority is freely exercised.

### *The Kingdom of God in Paul's Epistles*

Acts makes clear that the kingdom of God was a recurring theme of Paul's preaching to both the Jews and the Gentiles and in his follow-up care for the believers. According to 14:22, Paul established the souls of the disciples by exhorting them to continue in the faith and by urging them to enter into the kingdom of God through much tribulation. He spoke of the kingdom of God not only to the Jews (19:8) but also to the believing Christians, many of whom were Gentiles. During the last time he saw the elders of the church in Ephesus, he reminded them that when he was among them, he repeatedly proclaimed the kingdom of God (20:25).

Paul's Epistles repeat his emphasis on the kingdom of God and show that he considered the kingdom of God to be both a coming inheritance and a present reality for the believers to experience in the church age (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 15:50; Gal. 5:21; 2 Thes. 1:5).

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For example, Paul preferred to go to the Corinthians as a beseeching father in “a spirit of meekness” (1 Cor. 4:21). Nevertheless, he told them that “the kingdom of God is not in speech but in power” (v. 20). Paul was dealing with some particular matters and problems in the church in Corinth, but he equated the authority in the church with the authority in the kingdom of God. The implication is that in certain aspects, such as authority, the kingdom of God is exercised in the churches in this age.

**R**omans 14:1 through 15:13 particularly validates the interpretation that the practical church life today is the kingdom of God. In 14:17 the kingdom of God does not refer to a future age or dispensation. The subject of this section of Romans is receiving the believers in the church life. In verse 1 Paul brings up the case of a believer who is “weak in faith” yet is a genuine Christian whom God has received (v. 3). Paul then illustrates this point by speaking of believers having conflicting convictions concerning eating (or not eating) certain foods or concerning the importance of certain days (vv. 3, 5). These types of convictions may differ between two believers, but the implication is that since both are household servants (v. 4), with the Lord being the Master of both and both belonging to the Lord, neither has the ground to judge the other servant. Instead of judging, there should be a walk that is according to love lest a man for whom Christ died be destroyed (v. 15). The reference to all having to stand before the judgment seat of God in the future (v. 10) reinforces the understanding that the kingdom of God referenced in verse 17 relates to the practical church life today.

According to 15:1-13, we should receive the believers according to Christ, that is, in the way that Christ received us (v. 7). This kind of receiving of the believers according to God and according to Christ takes place in the age of the church, that is, today practically in the church in the city in which we live. Although Romans 14:17 refers to the kingdom of God, it does so in the context of a very practical receiving of believers for the practice of the church life. This is an unambiguous proof that the proper practice of the church in the present dispensation is an expression of the kingdom of God.

### *The Kingdom of God in Peter’s Epistles*

Peter’s two Epistles contain only one explicit reference to the kingdom (2 Pet. 1:11); however, our participation in this kingdom under the governance of God is the underlying focus of both Epistles. Second Peter 1:3-11 speaks of the divine power that “has granted to us all things which relate to life and godliness” (v. 3). Then through our participation in these precious and exceedingly great promises of God, being “partakers of the divine nature” (v. 4), a process of organic growth and development in the divine life results in a rich and bountiful “entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (v. 11). Although the kingdom here may be interpreted as a future reward or portion, the entrance is rooted and grounded in the present exercise of the believers. Those believers who in this age faithfully pursue the growth in the divine life unto maturity and who further pursue the development of the virtues that correspond to God’s divine nature will be rewarded with the co-participation in the eternal kingdom of God that has been given to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (cf. Dan. 7:13-14). It is the believers’ present experience of the kingdom with its kingdom virtues that qualifies them to participate in the millennial entrance into the eternal kingdom of God.

### *The Kingdom of God in John’s Writings*

In the Gospel of John, the Lord Jesus first spoke of the kingdom of God in an organic context. To “see the kingdom of God” and “enter into the kingdom of God,” a new birth is needed (3:3, 5). Those who receive and believe into the Word in whom is life, that is, into Jesus Christ, become the children of God by being begotten of God (cf. 1:12-13). This birth, regeneration, is accomplished through the life of God

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being imparted by the Holy Spirit of God into the human spirit (3:6). The life of God is needed both to see and to enter into the kingdom of God. These are the experiences of believers in the present church age; thus, according to John, the kingdom of God is a present reality and experience sourced in the life of God.

In John's Gospel the kingdom is also a matter of authority. While Jesus was being examined by Pilate, He referred to His kingdom as being not of this world (18:33, 36). Later, when Pilate asserted that he had authority to either release Jesus or crucify Him (19:10), Jesus referred him to the authority "from above" (v. 11), thereby indicating that God is the ultimate source of authority (cf. Rom. 13:1).

John's Epistles make no explicit mention of king, kingdom, or reigning. However, they refer repeatedly to both life (1 John 1:1-2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20) and the practice of righteousness (2:29; 3:7, 10). First John emphasizes the divine and eternal life of God that abides in those who have received this life by believing into Christ. As joint participants of the eternal life, we have fellowship with God the Father (the source of the divine life), with His Son Jesus Christ (the Word of life and the very life itself), and with one another (1:3-7). Our participation in the kingdom of God is not the result of a mere purchase but a matter of birth.

The book of Revelation refers to the kingdom both as a future manifestation and a present reality. At the time of the seventh trumpet, there is a declaration of a future event during which "the kingdom of the world" becomes "the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever" (11:15). In 12:10 the "loud voice" refers to "the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ." In Revelation 1, however, John states that Jesus Christ has already "made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father" (vv. 5-6) and also that he, John, was in the reality of the kingdom (v. 9). John considers that the recipients of his writing are presently a kingdom of priests through Christ's redemption. The redeemed ones' reigning on the earth will be a coming, future manifestation, but they have already been purchased and have already been made both kings and priests to God (cf. 5:9-10).

Revelation 20 and 22 indicate, respectively, two stages of the coming manifestation of the kingdom. Chapter 20 speaks of the overcomers' future participation in a millennial kingdom (vv. 4, 6). They are given authority to reign. They receive the kingdom and enjoy it. Chapter 22 shows that, ultimately, in the new heaven and the new earth, all of God's redeemed will serve Him as priests (v. 3), "see His face" (v. 4), be under the illumination of the Lord God, and "reign forever and ever" (v. 5).

### *The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the Heavens in Matthew*

Matthew refers to the kingdom of God in his Gospel (cf. 6:33; 12:28; 21:43), but he also uses uniquely, purposely, and repeatedly the term *the kingdom of the heavens*.<sup>5</sup> By virtue of Matthew's former trade and practice, this self-described tax collector (10:3) cannot be assigned to a category of authors prone to generalizations, approximations, or "rounding errors." It is safer to assume that Matthew uses terms precisely, eschewing obfuscation, especially concerning the King and His kingdom. *The kingdom of God* refers to God's dispensational manifestation of His authority from eternity past to eternity future, a manifestation in four stages. In Matthew *the kingdom of the heavens* refers to only two stages in this manifestation—the New Testament age of grace and the millennial kingdom.

Strictly speaking, eternity is unbound from time. However, as time-bound creatures (cf. Psalms 8:4), we unavoidably think and speak of eternity "past" and eternity "future." The Bible records utterances—"I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14), "I am the First and I am the Last" (Isaiah 44:6), and "Him who is and who was and who is coming" (Revelation 1:4)—

that express the eternity of God. The kingdom of God is an eternal kingdom, including past, present, and future. Referring to eternity past and eternity future, David said, “You are blessed, O Jehovah, God of Israel, our Father, from eternity to eternity... Yours, O Jehovah, is the kingdom” (1 Chron. 29:10-11). Psalm 145 declares, “Your kingdom is an eternal kingdom, / And Your dominion is throughout all generations” (v. 13). Daniel similarly says, “His dominion is an eternal dominion, which will not pass away; / And His kingdom is one that will not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:14).

The future kingdom will include Christ, the incarnated Son of God. Isaiah prophesied that Christ would be born of man but be called Mighty God, and as the Son given, He would be called Eternal Father. The government will be upon His shoulder. He is the Prince of Peace, and His peace will be an eternal peace. As a man, He will establish and sit on the throne of David, but because He is God, He will uphold it “from now to eternity” (Isa. 9:6-7).

This future eternal kingdom of God, which will also be the kingdom of the Son of His love (Col. 1:13), also includes God’s regenerated people, the saints. According to Daniel 7:18, “the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever.” The saints will not only possess the kingdom but also bear some responsibility in it (vv. 22, 27).

**T**he kingdom of God is an eternal kingdom under the sovereign rule of the God of eternity, who rules from eternity past to eternity future. The eternal God has set forth “according to His good pleasure” an “eternal purpose” (Eph. 1:9; 3:11), a purpose for the ages, which He intends to carry out betwixt eternity past and eternity future. The elements of this purpose existed in eternity past, “before the foundation of the world” (1:4; 1 Pet. 1:20; John 17:5, 24). The economy for accomplishing His eternal plan involves “the fullness of the times” (Eph. 1:10), that is, some ages of timely dispensation. At a minimum, there are four such “dispensations.” Two of these ages occur in the Old Testament, and two, in the New Testament. The kingdom of God comprises both eternity and all the dispensations. However, the kingdom of the heavens relates to only two of the dispensations.

The Old Testament repeatedly refers to God’s intention of having a kingdom. In His creation of man, God intended for man to “have dominion” (Gen. 1:26, 28), especially “over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” (v. 26). The phrase *every creeping thing* hints at the existence of opposing forces. In verse 28 God commanded the male and female whom He created: “Fill the earth and subdue it” (v. 28). *Subdue* also hints that at the time of man’s creation there was already a struggle for authority.

According to Genesis 2, this original couple was placed in a delightful environment. However, in this setting, the magnanimous God, for the purpose of enabling man’s free will, allowed for a choice between life and death (vv. 16-17). In Genesis 3 the woman was deceived by the serpent (2 Cor. 11:3); Adam, however, “was not deceived” (1 Tim. 2:14). Rather, being there “with her,” he willfully ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:6). Adam—notwithstanding his later protestations to Jehovah that “the woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate” (v. 12)—made a deliberate choice. Romans 5:12 unambiguously assigns to Adam the instrumental responsibility, delineating that “through one man sin entered into the world, and through sin, death.” As a result, “death reigned from Adam until Moses” (v. 14). The hidden cause of this death, sin, which entered through the one man, was not exposed until the law came. The final verse of Genesis confirms that death reigned during this age: “Joseph died,...and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt” (50:26). This period, the time of the fathers (cf. John 7:22), was the dispensation before the law.

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**DURING THE DISPENSATION OF GRACE AND REALITY, THE KINGDOM OF THE HEAVENS HAS BEGUN TO BE MANIFESTED ON EARTH—IN THE PERSON OF CHRIST INITIALLY AND THROUGH THE ENLARGEMENT OF CHRIST, THAT IS, THROUGH THE CHURCH, SUBSEQUENTLY.**

Man's many failures during this age did not deter God from His original intention. In the final chapters of Genesis we see that Joseph became the de facto ruler over Egypt, the most significant and influential part of the earth at that time (cf. 41:40-41). Furthermore, Jacob demonstrated through his blessing hands that he was greater even than Pharaoh (47:10; cf. Heb. 7:7). Simultaneously, Joseph acknowledged that he was subject to the sovereign God (cf. Gen. 50:19), implying that he was in the kingdom of God. Hence, through Jacob and Joseph, the kingdom of God remained extant until the next dispensation.

John 1:17 says, "The law was given through Moses; grace and reality came through Jesus Christ," thereby marking a second dispensation, that of the law. The age of the law extends from the decree of the law given to Moses in Exodus to the first coming of Christ. The kingdom of God remained with Israel during this dispensational period. For example, Jehovah God, in a mountaintop conversation with Moses, promised that the children of Israel would become to Him "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:6). Later, David declared, "Yours, O Jehovah, is the kingdom, and You are exalted as Head over all" (1 Chron. 29:11).

In one section of this dispensation, the Israelites were carried away to captivity. The temple was destroyed, and the political kingdoms of Israel and Judah ceased to exist. Nevertheless, the kingdom of God remained. Daniel 4 speaks of a time when their Babylonian captor, Nebuchadnezzar, was to be severely disciplined until he came "to know that the Most High is the Ruler over the kingdom of men and gives it to whomever He wills" and "to know that the heavens do rule" (vv. 25-26). In recounting how God dealt with him (v. 2), Nebuchadnezzar said, "His kingdom is an eternal kingdom, / And His dominion is from generation to generation" (v. 3).

The third dispensation is of "grace and reality" as embodied in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:17), and it is during this dispensation of grace and reality that the kingdom of the heavens has begun to be manifested on earth—in the person of Christ initially and through the enlargement of Christ, that is, through the church, subsequently. Romans 5:21 draws a parallel between the first dispensation, in which "sin reigned in death," and the third, in which grace reigns "through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." This third age, which began with Christ's first coming, has an aspect of mystery. In Mark 4:11 the Lord Jesus referred to the "mystery of the kingdom of God." It is somewhat hidden, especially to the Jews. However, the revelation of the mystery of the gospel as the proclamation of Jesus Christ, "which has been kept in silence in the times of the ages," has been "made known to all the Gentiles" (Rom. 16:25-26). According to Matthew 24:30, the Jews will see Christ at His second coming: "Then all the tribes of the land will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." In addition to the mystery of the gospel, this mystery comprises the mystery of God; the mystery of His will; the economy of the mystery; the mystery of Christ, especially in His indwelling; and the mystery of Christ and the church (Eph. 1:9; 3:4, 9; 5:32; 6:19; Col. 1:26; 2:2).

Hebrews 9:28 is helpful in delineating the church age: "So Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time to those who eagerly await Him, apart from sin, unto salvation." We can infer from this verse that the first coming of Christ includes His incarnation, human living, all-inclusive redemptive death, life-imparting resurrection, ascension, and the outpouring of the Spirit, at which time the church came into being (cf. Eph. 1:19-22). This third dispensation, the age of grace, will conclude with Christ's second coming.

The fourth age begins with the second coming of Christ and will conclude with the dissolution of the old heaven and the old earth, which will be melted, be rolled up,

have no place found for them, and pass away (2 Pet. 3:10-12; Heb. 1:12; Rev. 20:11; 21:1). This final judgment will bring in for eternity the new heavens and new earth (Isa. 65:17; 66:22). The fourth dispensation will last one thousand years (Rev. 20:4, 6). The millennial kingdom will consist of a heavenly part and an earthly part. The heavenly part—corresponding to the kingdom of the heavens and the kingdom of the Father (Matt. 13:43)—will comprise Christ with the overcoming saints as the kings. The earthly part—corresponding with the kingdom of Messiah, the tabernacle of David, and the restored kingdom of Israel—will comprise the saved Israelites as the priests and the restored nations as the people (cf. 2 Sam. 7:13; Acts 15:16; 1:6; Rom. 11:26-27; Zech. 8:20-23; Acts 3:21; Matt. 25:32-34).

In summary, from Adam to Moses was the dispensation before law (without law); from Moses to Christ (John 1:17) was the dispensation of law; from Christ's first coming to the restoration of all things (Acts 3:20-21) is the dispensation of grace; and from Christ's second coming to the end of the millennium (Rev. 11:15; 20:4, 6) is the dispensation of the kingdom. These dispensations are used by God to accomplish His work of the new creation in the old creation.

**T**he 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. A comparison of Matthew with parallel verses in the other three Gospels supports this understanding. For example, Luke 16:16 says, "The law and the prophets were until John; from that time the kingdom of God is proclaimed as the gospel"; this verse indicates that John the Baptist was in the kingdom of God, but he was a part of the dispensation of the law. For this reason Jesus said in Matthew 11:11 that "he who is least in the kingdom of the heavens is greater than [John the Baptist]." In Matthew 4:17 the Lord Jesus proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near," and in Mark 1:15 He said, "The kingdom of God has drawn near," indicating that the kingdom of the heavens is part of the kingdom of God. Similarly, a comparison of Matthew 13:11 with Mark 4:11 shows that the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens are the same as the mystery of the kingdom of God.

Matthew speaks of the kingdom of the heavens in three aspects: its reality, its appearance, and its manifestation. The reality and the appearance correspond to certain aspects of the church age. The manifestation corresponds to the heavenly section of the millennial kingdom. In chapters 5 through 7 Jesus as the King gave the decree of the constitution of the kingdom of the heavens. These so-called Beatitudes describe the nature of the kingdom people. The reality of the kingdom of the heavens is the inward content of the kingdom of the heavens in its heavenly and spiritual nature. In 6:31-33 the Lord told the kingdom people to not be anxious but to instead seek the kingdom and the righteousness of the heavenly Father who knows our need. Note 1 by Witness Lee on verse 33 in the Recovery Version says,

The Father's kingdom is the reality of the kingdom of the heavens today, the reality of the church life today, and will be the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens in the coming age... Since the kingdom people seek first the kingdom and the righteousness of their heavenly Father, not only will His kingdom and His righteousness be given to them, but also all that they need will be added to them.

Matthew 13 describes in parables the appearance of the kingdom of the heavens, that is, the kingdom in its outward state in name. The reality of the kingdom of the heavens is the proper church life (Rom. 14:17), which exists within the appearance of the kingdom of the heavens, that is, within Christendom. In Matthew 13:31-32 Jesus likened the kingdom of the heavens (cf. "the kingdom of God" in Mark 4:30-31) to a mustard seed, which is supposed to be an herb but, instead, grows abnormally into

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a tree. This outward appearance becomes leavened (Matt. 13:33) and even ends up with false constituents, as signified by the tares (vv. 25, 38). In chapters 24 and 25 the King unveiled the kingdom of the heavens in its manifestation, which is the practical coming of the kingdom of the heavens in power. The manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens is the heavenly part of the coming millennial kingdom, which is referred to as the kingdom of the Father in 13:43 and 26:29 (cf. “kingdom of God” in Mark 14:25).

The foregoing biblical overview of the kingdom of God serves as the basis for the understanding of the relationship between the kingdom and the churches as seen in the book of Acts. The Gospels show that the kingdom should be a central focus of the ministry, work, and gospel as carried out by the disciples of Jesus. Matthew 24:14 says that “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 28:18-20 the resurrected Jesus, exercising the authority given to Him as the Son of Man, in turn sent His disciples with this authority to disciple all the nations—both by baptizing them and by teaching them. The disciples “go” not only with the Lord’s authority, that is, with the kingdom, but also with Him personally in His invisible presence.

Nevertheless, at the time of Acts 1:6 the disciples were still preoccupied with the restoration of a physical kingdom in Israel. The Lord’s reply redirected them back to the Spirit and to Himself: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be My witnesses...unto the uttermost part of the earth” (v. 8). In the context of the kingdom of God, which comprises all dispensations, the disciples were to focus on the aspect of the kingdom of God corresponding to the kingdom of the heavens in the present age, the dispensation of grace. This aspect of the kingdom is one of life and reality. The kingdom is organic in that it is the word of God sown as a seed, which sprouts, takes root, grows normally according to the nature of the divine life, and bears fruit, that is, overflows and expresses the riches of the life of God. This expression includes righteousness, order, submission to authority, peace, joy, love, one accord, and many other human virtues and divine attributes. The characteristics of this divine life and reality should be manifested practically in the church universally and in the churches locally.

## The Church and the Churches in the New Testament

### *The Universal Aspect of the Church and the Kingdom in Matthew 16*

The context of the first mention of the church in its universal aspect (Matt. 16:18) is instructive, dispelling many unbiblical connotations ascribed to the word *church*. The Lord’s possessive declaration—“My church”—indicates that the *ekklesia*, “the congregation of the called-out ones,” is of the Lord and belongs to Him. The church is not only possessively but also elementally of Christ and of God (1 Cor. 1:2; 10:32). Hence, the church should not be denominating according to any other person’s name or constituted according to some other matter or thing.

When Peter received the Father’s revelation that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16), the Lord further revealed to him that He would build His church (v. 18). Those who see Christ should go further to see the importance of building the church. In 16:18 and 19 Jesus used the term *kingdom* interchangeably with *church*, showing that the building of the church stirs up opposition. These verses speak of the gates of Hades and of binding and loosing, thereby indicating that the building of the church is a matter of spiritual warfare. There is a struggle between two kingdoms—the kingdom of the heavens and the gates of Hades. The gates of Hades have imprisoned fallen sinners; thus, keys are needed to release these captives so that they can receive, experience, and enjoy Christ and be built into the church. Although



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the fulfillment of the Lord's prophecy, "I will build My church," began with Peter's opening word at Pentecost to the Jewish believers (Acts 2:38-41) and continued with his message to the Gentile believers in the house of Cornelius (10:34-48), the building of the church has not yet been completed. Those in the church need to continue to bind and loose on earth what has been bound and loosed in the heavens. To bind is to bind the work and expression of Satan, including the work and expression of the self and the soul-life (cf. Matt. 16:22-25; cf. Luke 9:24). The church needs to bring the kingdom of the heavens and the will of the heavens to the earth. This is to pray, "Your kingdom come; Your will be done, as in heaven, so also on earth" (Matt. 6:10).

### *The Local Aspect of the Church and the Kingdom in Matthew 18*

The practicality of both the kingdom and the church takes place locally on earth with those who are around us and with whom we interact regularly. Matthew 18 opens with the disciples inquiring of Jesus, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of the heavens?" (v. 1). The Lord replied that the requirement for entering the kingdom is not being great but being like little children, especially in the sense of humility (vv. 2-4), of neither stumbling others nor being a cause of stumbling (vv. 5-9), and of not despising even the littlest of believers (vv. 10-14).

Jesus then described a process for reconciliation when one brother sins against another. First, the offended brother must go to the offending one alone and make the sin known to him, giving him an opportunity to confess and to repent (v. 15). This matter should be discussed in love and remain covered, that is, not spoken of publicly. If the sinning brother does not hear this, the offended brother should bring the matter to a small number of witnesses who can help the offending brother repent (v. 16). The implication is that these witnesses are part of the local church. However, these two or three are not the church, because if the offending brother refuses to hear these two or three, the matter should then be brought to the church (v. 17). The church here must refer to the local church, as represented by those serving in the administrative role as elders, that is, in the governance of the church. If the sinning brother does not hear the church, there is some exercise of authority and discipline toward the sinning brother, which includes his losing the fellowship of the church. To "hear the church" (v. 17) is to hear the local church, which means to come under the authority of the local church as the kingdom of God.

Most Bible readers would consider this as the end of the process. However, the next verse says, "Whatever you bind on the earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on the earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (v. 18). It is significant that this word echoes the words that the Lord spoke in 16:19, after He mentioned the universal church in 16:18. This indicates that the church, in its local aspect, also represents the kingdom of the heavens, having the authority to bind and loose on earth what has been bound or loosed in heaven. Matthew 18:19-20 goes on to speak of two praying in harmony to the Father and of two or three gathered into the name of the Son. In the context of these verses, these should be the same two or three involved with the case of the sinning brother. As a result of their harmonious yet binding-and-loosing prayer on the earth, they receive an answer from the Father and enjoy the presence of the Son in their midst. As a result of their struggle in prayer, the brother is released from the sin that bound him, and he repents.

If the sinning brother indeed repents, the offended brother must forgive. This indicates that there is the danger that even if the sinning brother repents, the offended brother may harbor the offense and be reluctant to forgive. This may explain why at this juncture Peter asked the Lord how many times he should forgive a brother who sinned against him (v. 21). Peter's question hints that he may have experienced being the "sinned against" brother and that the brother who offended him was perhaps a

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“multiple offender.” In response, the Lord said that Peter must forgive “up to seventy times seven” times (v. 22) and then gave a parable concerning the kingdom of the heavens being like a king settling accounts with his slaves (vv. 23-34). In this parable the king forgave a slave who had a debt that was impossible for that slave to pay off. However, this same slave did not have compassion to forgive the debt of a fellow slave who owed him a significant but infinitesimally smaller debt. This grieved the fellow slaves who saw what had taken place, so they explained the matter to their master.

This parable concerning the kingdom of the heavens is given in the context of a case of sinning and sinned-against brothers in a local church. In such a context, further binding and loosing may be needed. After the sinning brother repents, the two or three may have to pray so that the brother who was sinned against will have the compassion to release the sinning brother from the offense and forgive him from his heart (cf. vv. 21, 35) and also to be released from any lingering vestiges of offense. Thus, chapter 18 speaks of relationships in the kingdom, which, practically speaking, are relationships in a local church. Therefore, the implicit and deeper implication is that the church in its local aspect (churches) is the kingdom of God.

### *The Church and the Churches in Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation*

Acts, being somewhat of a chronological account, does not use the term *churches* until chapter 15, when Paul and Silas were passing through Syria and Cilicia “confirming the churches” (v. 41). However, *church* is used repeatedly before this first use of *churches* in the New Testament.

**I**t is important to consider in detail the biblical usage of the term *churches*. The New Testament refers, sometimes, to the church and, at other times, to the churches, indicating that there is at least some distinction between the church and the churches. However, while there is a plurality of churches, there remains only one kingdom of God. The distinctions require an honest critique of the teachings concerning the church and the church practices seen in today’s Christianity, measuring them against the pattern set forth in the New Testament.

### *The New Testament Never Referring to More Than One Church in a Locality*

A pattern emerges when reviewing the New Testament references to the plural form of *ekklesia*. The first correlation relates to geography. In Acts 15:41 the churches that were strengthened and confirmed by Paul and Silas were in Syria and Cilicia. According to Acts 15:23, Syria and Cilicia were not two cities or towns but geographic regions (cf. Matt. 4:24; Luke 2:2; Gal. 1:21). We can find a correlation between regions and a plurality of churches in eighteen of the over thirty New Testament references to churches. In addition to the reference in Acts 15:41, we have in the Epistles references to “the churches of Galatia” (1 Cor. 16:1; Gal. 1:2), “the churches of Macedonia” (2 Cor. 8:1), and “the churches in Judea” (Gal. 1:22; 1 Thes. 2:14). In Revelation the multiple references to “the churches” correlate to “the...churches in the province of Asia” (1:4 NIV; cf. vv. 11, 20; 2:7, 11, 17, 23, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 22:16). According to the New Testament pattern, there may be a number of churches in a geographic region. Furthermore, it is normal for churches in the same region to have common fellowship with one another. Paul instructed the Colossians to read the letter that he sent to the Laodiceans and asked that the Colossians “also read the one from Laodicea” (Col. 4:16). In Revelation John was instructed to write down what he saw and send it to the seven churches in the region, the province, of Asia (1:11). The seven churches in that region were “carbon copied” on the same correspondence. These seven churches had no special additional identifiers that refer to special doctrines, particular practices, racial or cultural distinctions, etc. The churches were simply addressed by the name of their respective city. In these verses we can see the

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reference to multiple churches in a province. However, we find no instance in the New Testament where there are multiple churches in one city.

### *All the Churches Receiving the Same Instructions and Doing the Same Gospel Service*

In the second mention in Acts, *churches* also correlates with *cities*. In chapter 16 Paul and Silas went through the cities, delivering to them a common message. Each church heard “the decrees to keep which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem” (v. 4). This shows that all the churches received the same instructions, that is, the same teaching and ministry. The blessed result was that “the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in number daily” (v. 5).

### *The Apostles Having the Same Care, Expectation, and Teaching for Every Church*

In 2 Corinthians 11:28 Paul says that he was pressed daily with the pressure and “the anxious concern for all the churches.” In 1 Corinthians 4 Paul sets himself as a pattern of being a loving father to the saints whom he had “begotten...through the gospel” (vv. 15-16). He sent Timothy to remind the Corinthians of his “ways which are in Christ,” even as he taught “everywhere in every church” (v. 17). The apostles’ teaching was universally consistent, not varying from church to church (cf. 7:17; 11:16). The expectation is that all the churches would be the same in teaching and in practice.

### *The Source, Nature, and Element of the Churches Being of God, of Christ, and of the Saints*

The churches are of God (v. 16; 2 Thes. 1:4). *Of God* indicates that the churches came out from God and belong to God. The believers in the church are born of God (John 1:12-13), are the firstfruits of His creatures, and are thus corporately the church of the firstborn, that is, the church of God (James 1:18; Heb. 12:23; 1 Cor. 1:2). The churches are also of Christ and in Christ (Rom. 16:16; Gal. 1:22). In 1 Corinthians 1:2 “the church of God” equals “those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus”; hence, they are “the called saints.” The believers in Christ have the nature of God and the element of Christ, having been born of God, having been separated, set apart, unto God, and belonging to Him. Therefore, the church is composed of saints, and the saints are the constituents of the church. Hence, the churches are of the saints (14:33).

### *The Church Being the Body of Christ*

Paul’s prayer for the believers in Ephesians 1:15-23 concludes with the church as the Body, the fullness of Christ. The church is not only a congregation of called-out ones who meet together but also an organic extension and issue of the incarnated, crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ. As “the fullness of the One who fills all in all” (v. 23), the church is the overflowing expression of who Christ is in all His riches (cf. 3:8). This universal Body is composed of two corporate peoples, the Jews and the Gentiles, who were both reconciled “in one Body to God through the cross” (2:16). Through “the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel” that were announced to them (3:8), the Gentiles have become in Christ Jesus “fellow heirs and fellow members of the Body and fellow partakers of the promise” (v. 6).

**T**he saints need to be perfected by the gifted members “unto the work of the ministry, unto the building up of the Body of Christ” (4:12). This building is equated to “the growth of the Body” that results from the joining and knitting together of the members through “every joint of the rich supply” and “the operation in the measure

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of each one part" (v. 16). Chapter 5 speaks of Christ as the Husband being the "Head of the church," which is His wife, and of His also being the Savior of the Body (v. 23). Ephesians concludes with the church as the warrior. To be "empowered in the Lord" and to "put on the whole armor of God" in order to "stand against the stratagems of the devil" (6:10-11) indicate that the building up of the Body, which is the building up of the church, is a matter of warfare in this age. This warfare cannot be carried out individually by our own strength; it requires us to be in the Lord and in the Body.

### *Building the Church on the Ground of the Oneness*

In Ephesians 2:20-22 Paul uses the building of the Old Testament temple as a type for the church as God's dwelling place. This building is being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The New Jerusalem as the ultimate "tabernacle of God" will have "twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:3, 14). In 1 Corinthians 3:10 Paul says that he is "a wise master builder," one who has "laid a foundation" upon which others build. In verse 11 he states that the foundation is Jesus Christ. This echoes the Lord's word in Matthew 16. After Peter received the revelation from the Father that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus went on to say, "Upon this rock I will build My church" (vv. 16-18). *This rock* refers both to Christ and to the revelation concerning Christ.

Paul refers to the Corinthians as "infants in Christ" (1 Cor. 3:1); hence, he utilizes symbolic language to encourage them to build the church by growing in life and by building with the proper materials. Thus, he likens the church to God's cultivated land and God's building (v. 9). A farm, cultivated land, requires planting, watering, and growth. A building requires proper materials that are built upon a proper foundation. The church is built upon the unique foundation that God has laid, that is, upon the Lord Jesus Christ. However, Paul warns that each man should "take heed how he builds upon" this foundation (v. 10). Paul is giving the warning that the foundation may be right, but the materials may not be right.

**I**n addition to materials and a foundation, a specific plot of land is needed. At Paul's time there was a physical temple in Jerusalem built of certain materials and upon a foundation. However, most importantly, this temple was built within Jerusalem at a specific location. After the children of Israel were taken away into captivity, the temple was not rebuilt until the captives returned to Israel and took possession of Jerusalem. A few years after Paul's departure, the temple was torn down, and Jerusalem fell into the hands of the Gentiles (cf. Matt. 24:1-2; Luke 21:24). Even to this day, there is no temple in Jerusalem, not for lack of materials and, strictly speaking, not for lack of a foundation but because there is no ground upon which to lay the foundation. The current dispute regarding the rebuilding of the temple is about the ground, that is, about the specific plot of land—the space, place, and location—where the temple is to be built. Even if some were to build a replica of the temple to its exact specifications, even to the point of using the exact foundation, but placed it on another ground, the Jews would not recognize that building as the genuine temple.

It is in this sense that we follow the principle set forth by Paul, applying the type of God's building to the church and referring to "the ground of the church." As Paul indicates, we must build the church upon the proper foundation with the proper materials. However, this building must also be on the proper ground. At Paul's time the churches were situated on the God-ordained ground of the locality in which the saints lived; there was only one church in one locality. In Acts 15 the apostles addressed problems of foundation, such as what to require or not require of the Gentile believers, since some were trying to build the church on the foundation of law-keeping (cf. vv. 10, 21). Paul spoke also about the materials, because the Corinthians were

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neglecting the precious things of Christ and the Spirit and were, instead, involved in sinful and fleshly activities (1 Cor. 3:12).

In the current situation of Christianity, not only are there problems of “foundation” and “materials”; there is even more the problem of “ground.” Protestant denominations and “free” groups claim to be on the right foundation; most, if not all, claim that the Trinity, the person of Christ, and the gospel are their foundation. Furthermore, these various denominations may even be using the right materials for building, such as the Scriptures, prayer, and the Spirit. However, that any of these Christian denominations recognize or stand on the biblical ground of the church is belied by the very existence and multiplicity of these denominations and divisions. It seems that Christians feel free to “build the temple” without any consideration of the ground of the church.

**I**n the Old Testament, God was very specific when He chose a place as His worship center, as His habitation, and as the location for the offering of sacrifices: “To the place which Jehovah your God will choose out of all your tribes to put His name, to His habitation, shall you seek, and there shall you go” (Deut. 12:5, cf. v. 11). God had in mind “the place.” In the history of Israel, God’s desire for such a place was fulfilled, but Israel first had to gain the land through much warfare and establish a proper kingdom. Eventually, when King Solomon completed the building of the temple in Jerusalem and merged the tabernacle and its furniture with it, “the glory of Jehovah filled the house of Jehovah” (1 Kings 8:11). This situation reflected the oneness of the children of Israel. The Songs of Ascents, such as Psalm 133, express the blessedness and joy of that time: “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is / For brothers to dwell in unity!” (v. 1).

However, Israel later divided itself. Jeroboam, the king of the ten tribes, “rebelled against the house of David” and set up alternate worship centers in Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:19, 29), for fear that “the heart of this people” would return to Judah when they went “to make sacrifices in the house of Jehovah at Jerusalem” (v. 27). These competing altars are repeatedly referred to as “the sins of Jeroboam” (14:15; cf. 12:30; 13:34). Both of these scenes—positively with Solomon’s temple on God’s designated site in Jerusalem and negatively with the apostasy of Jeroboam—illustrate the importance of the ground of oneness.

The pattern for building the church on the proper ground is set forth in the New Testament, but it requires a pure heart and motive both to see and to accept this fact. Furthermore, because there are evil spiritual forces that realize the importance of the built-up church and oppose it, a willingness to pay the price to build according to this pattern is also required.

The seven churches in Revelation are perhaps the clearest illustration and pattern of the ground of the church in the New Testament. John was instructed to write down the revelation that he saw and send it to seven churches in the province of Asia (Rev. 1:11). However, the list in verse 11 is of seven cities. When each church was addressed specifically, it was simply called the church in that city—for example, the church in Ephesus, the church in Smyrna, etc. (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). This is consistent with other New Testament references to local churches—the church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1; 11:22), the church at Antioch (13:1, NIV), and the church in Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1). Other designations consistently retain the scope of the city—the church of God in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1) and the church of the Thesalonians (1 Thes. 1:1; 2 Thes. 1:1). Similarly, Paul writes to “the saints who are in Ephesus” (Eph. 1:1), implying that the local church comprises the saints there.

The New Testament never applies the term *church* to a physical building. In

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1 Corinthians 1:2 *the church of God which is in Corinth* is in apposition to *those who have been sanctified*; this, in turn, is in apposition to *the called saints*. *Saints* refers to those who have been sanctified, and these sanctified ones are the church of God in that particular city. Hence, the local church comprises all the saints in a given city. The degradation of today's Christianity is regularly manifested in the regrettable daily vernacular: "Which church do you go to?" "Going to church" means spending time in a denominated physical location. "Build the church" is a fundraising tag line for the construction of physical edifices. What a deviation from the Word of God!

### *One City, One Eldership, One Local Church*

The New Testament indicates that the local oversight and management of the church is also by city. In Paul's Epistle to Titus he instructs him to "appoint elders in every city" (1:5). On their return from their first journey, Barnabas and Saul appointed elders "in every church" (Acts 14:23). Later, when Paul was in Miletus, "he sent word to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church" (20:17); he sent word to a city to call the elders of the church in that city. In verse 28 Paul said to these same elders that the Holy Spirit had placed them "as overseers to shepherd the church of God." *Elder* denotes a person of relative maturity, whereas *overseer* denotes the function of an elder. Furthermore, overseers are not a separate group from the saints. Paul writes "to all the saints... in Philippi, with the overseers and deacons" (Phil. 1:1). Here Paul considers that the church includes overseers and deacons as part of the saints. In a note on the word *with* in this verse in the Recovery Version, Witness Lee says that "this indicates further that in any locality there should be just one church with one group of people comprising all the saints in that locality." The error of the episcopal system of ecclesiastical government with its hierarchy derives from the mistaken interpretation that an overseer (Gk. *episkopos*) is a different person from an elder (Gk. *presbyteros*). The scope of both functions—to be a pattern in the growth in life and to be faithful and diligent in the administration of affairs—is local.

The ground of the church is based on location, that is, the city, not on the number of saints in the church. Consider the example of the church in Jerusalem. On the day of Pentecost about three thousand souls were added (Acts 2:41). The Lord continued to add "together day by day those who were being saved" (v. 47). Later, more were "added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women" (5:14). By the time of Acts 21, there were "many thousands" of believers (v. 20) in Jerusalem. Notwithstanding this large number of believers, there was still one church—the church in Jerusalem (cf. 8:1)—and one eldership (cf. 15:6; 21:18).

### *Meeting from House to House and the Church in a House*

In the early days of the church in Jerusalem, believers met from house to house (2:46; 5:42). This practice of having multiple meetings seems to have continued as time went on. When Peter was arrested and put in prison (12:3-4), fervent prayer was made "by the church of God" (v. 5). As a result of this prayer, Peter was rescued by the Lord through an angel. Verse 12 says that "he went to the house of Mary... where there was a considerable number assembled together and praying." After relating what the Lord had done, he asked them to report "these things to James and the brothers," which indicates that James and the brothers were in a different place, and Peter then went "to another place" (v. 17). Here we see that in Jerusalem there were several meetings taking place simultaneously, yet they were still one church in that locality.

Given the large number of saints in Jerusalem, it may have been impractical for all the Christians in the city to assemble at the same time in the same physical facility. However, the phrase *if, therefore, the whole church comes together in one place* in 1 Corinthians 14:23 suggests that it was both possible and even typical in many places.

Conversely, in some localities it seems that the entire church could meet in someone's house. Romans 16 indicates that the church in Rome met in the house of Prisca and Aquila (vv. 3, 5). When they were in Ephesus, the church there met in their house (Acts 18:18-19; 1 Cor. 16:19). The church in Laodicea met in the house of Nymphas (Col. 4:15), and the church in Colossae met in Philemon's house (Philem. 2). These examples do not mean that there were multiple "house churches" in a city; rather, they indicate that with a smaller number of believers in that city, it was practical for all the saints in a locality to meet together in one house.

### *Practical Application of the Ground of the Church*

The practical application of the ground of the church, the ground of oneness, is exemplified and manifested in the receiving of all believers in a particular locality, no matter their spiritual condition, doctrinal inclinations, or cultural or ethnic background. If Christ has received a person, a genuine church will receive that same one. If we follow the apostle's instruction in Romans 14 and 15 concerning receiving the believers, we will be right and proper toward those whom we receive, and we will have peace with them. Consequently, we will have joy in the Holy Spirit (14:17). This joy proves that we are living in the reality of God's kingdom and that we are under God's rule.

In the Gospels the Lord Jesus spoke two seemingly contradictory words, which we may consider as maxims, that are helpful in the context of receiving the believers and maintaining the oneness in practicality. In Mark 9:40 the Lord said, "He who is not against us is for us," but in Matthew 12:30 He said, "He who is not with Me is against Me" (cf. Luke 11:23). The word in Mark speaks of outward conformity in practice and is in regard to people who are not against us (cf. 9:39); conversely, the word in Matthew speaks of inward unity of purpose in the context of people who were against the Lord (12:24). To maintain the inward unity, we need to practice the word in Matthew, and as to the outward conformity, we should practice the word in Mark, tolerating believers who differ from us.

At various times throughout the history of the church, attempts have been made to work out this ingrained aspiration to have a practical and genuine oneness. Peter Roberts identifies this motivation among the British Brethren in the initial stages of their movement in the 1820s: "The early Brethren shared the conviction based on Scripture that faith unites believers to Christ and causes them to become members of His Body, which is one and should not be divided in ecclesial practice" (100).

### *Building the Church through the Development of the Kingdom of God in the Local Churches*

In Matthew 16:18 the Lord prophesied that He would build His church. The fulfillment of this prophecy must take place in the church age, that is, in the present dispensation. Ephesians 2:19-22 is instructive in describing this building process. Verse 19 indicates that the former "strangers and sojourners" have become "fellow citizens with the saints." This indicates that all the believers are citizens in the kingdom of God, which is the sphere over which God exercises His authority. In this kingdom the citizens have rights, obligations, and responsibilities. Furthermore, the believers are also "members of the household of God," which refers to the house of God into which the believers were born. God's house is a matter of life and enjoyment. Christ is the cornerstone of this house, which is "being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (v. 20). In Christ "all the building" is "growing into a holy temple in the Lord" (v. 21). This refers to the universal building of the church. The juxtaposition of *building* with *growing* indicates the organic nature of the church, which derives from the divine and eternal life received by the believers (cf. 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). This life needs to simultaneously spread universally to others all over the earth and increase personally in every

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member unto transformation and maturity. Ephesians 2:22 continues, “In whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in spirit.” *You also* refers to the Ephesians, the local recipients of the Epistle to the Ephesians, that is, to the saints locally. This indicates that the building up of the church must also be local. First Corinthians 14:26 illustrates how the functions carried out by each one in the meetings of a local church build up the church. For example, “he who prophesies builds up the church” (v. 4). This shows how the Lord’s declaration that He will build the universal church is fulfilled practically in the local churches. These churches are the kingdom of God.

### Conclusion

Following the Lord’s resurrection, He appeared to over five hundred disciples (1 Cor. 15:6). One hundred and twenty of that number were inwardly empowered by the indwelling Spirit of Jesus to pray in one accord for ten days until Pentecost, at which time the Lord fulfilled His promise by pouring Himself out as the Spirit of power. Enabled from within by the indwelling Spirit and empowered without by the clothing Spirit, the disciples began to proclaim the gospel of the incarnated, crucified, resurrected, and ascended Jesus Christ. They not only spoke concerning Christ but were also one with Him and became His expression. What they spoke is described as “the words of this life” (5:20). The disciples became the corporate embodiment of this One, with His nature, life, living, and expression. The propagation of the living Christ had a practical outcome—the churches. These churches, large and small, were established in city after city. In these churches Christ is the King, the One who rules and reigns in life and with discipline. As subjects of this reigning, these churches become the practical expression of the kingdom of God on the earth today. In this practical church life the believers are priests and kings (Rev. 1:6). We expect a future kingdom, but those living a kingdom life in a local church, a local expression of the kingdom, will not be totally surprised when the kingdom comes in its full manifestation. This is because that kingdom will have many recognizable aspects of the proper church life today, including the life and nature of God, the expression of God, and the ruling of God. **AFC**

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This article draws from and synthesizes footnotes in the Recovery Version as well as other publications by Witness Lee.

<sup>2</sup>This training by appearing and disappearing was not limited to the twelve apostles (cf. Luke 24:13-35; 1 Cor. 15:5-8).

<sup>3</sup>The final verse of Acts leaves the reader in suspense as to what is next. More chapters continue to be added even to this day.

<sup>4</sup>The King James Version is somewhat unique among the English translations in using *churches* in Acts 9:31. Witness Lee’s note on *churches* in this verse in the Recovery Version says, “Since at that time the church had spread only to the regions of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, and since the word *whole* covers all the places where the church existed, *church* in singular is used here in the universal sense, although there must have been churches in the local sense in a number of the cities of these three regions.”

<sup>5</sup>For example, Matthew 11:11 and 13:11, 52 refer to the kingdom of the heavens in the church age, and 8:11 refers to the kingdom of the heavens in the age of the millennial kingdom.

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