

CHRIST'S CHURCH AND THE KINGDOM

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SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 1:15-23.

Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.

And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.
 (Matt. 16:19)

In last Sunday's sermon we showed how the people of Israel, by their rejection of Christ as their Messiah and King, lost for hundreds of years their opportunity to establish his kingdom. This nation, which was to have demonstrated to the world how God's government could operate to the blessing of men, was destroyed and scattered by the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and until recent years when a new nation of Israel was established, the Jews have had no government on earth.

Christianity was established on the religious foundations of Judaism laid down hundreds of years before by Moses and the prophets. As we have already seen in previous sermons, Israel was intended to be the nucleus for a universal kingdom under the rulership of God through his prophets. Israel was to be the demonstration of how a theocracy could work among righteous, receptive, godly, obedient people. It was God's purpose that not just a few people of Israel, but all nations and races and peoples should be constrained to recognize the benefits of this form of government, and be welcomed into the kingdom of God. But Israel lost sight of its universal responsibility for bringing others into the kingdom of God, and became narrow and exclusive. As Jesus said of the Pharisees, they neither entered into the kingdom themselves, nor allowed others to do so.

With the rejection of Christ as Messiah, Israel was rejected by God, and Christ turned to other means for setting up the nucleus of his kingdom. Beginning with his few Jewish followers, he began to organize and establish his church. The church was not to be his kingdom in its fullness, and more than the kingdom of Israel, even at its best, had been the perfect kingdom of God. The church was to be the predecessor of the kingdom, the hope and the promise of the kingdom, the means of transforming people into fit subjects for the kingdom, the matrix in which the kingdom on earth was eventually to be formed. The church, according to the imagery of the 12th chapter of Revelation, was to bring forth a man-child -- the kingdom -- which was to rule all nations with a rod of iron, the rod of iron according to other scripture being the word of God, indicative of a theocracy.

As a child resembles his mother and the mother resembles the child in bodily structure and organization of physical members and organs, so the church has an organization and structure similar to the kingdom. There was to be a close parallel between

the officers and organization of the church, and the officers and organization of the complete and full-fledged kingdom. The form and methods of government would be similar in church and kingdom. But note this point carefully; the church was not the finished kingdom; the kingdom was as yet in embryo from within the church.

God and Christ never intended that the officers of his church should take over political dominion and rule the world as kings and princes. The officers of Christ's church were to be subject to existing political power until the kingdom should be realized in its fullness, and established in dominion over all the earth under the rule of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The church was counselled to "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's," but to "render unto God the things that are God's," for he is still the supreme King. The kingdom was to be in the world, but not of the world. Rulers would still be permitted to rule over their worldly dominions by God's sufferance, and according to the agency of men in choosing and establishing the governments under which they lived. As in the days of ancient Israel God would give to men the best government they deserved -- the government that they chose and allowed to exist; and worldly governments will continue until the Christ himself returns to rule over all the world in righteousness.

Certain officers were set in the church of Christ, first by personal choice and command of Jesus, and after his ascension by the instruction and counsel of the Holy Spirit. These were to rule over the church not as political officers, but as servant of the church, ruling by love. The fourth chapter of Ephesians, and the 12th chapter of First Corinthians enumerate some of these officers -- Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers. Other scriptures mention elders, priests, deacons, and bishops. These officers were the rulers and overseers of the church. As men gave heed and obedience to them and to the ordinances which they were empowered to administer in the name of God, they became fitted for citizenship in the kingdom of God. These officers of the church were commissioned to go into all the world and preach the gospel. They sought out prospective subjects of the kingdom. They had authority to administer the rites and ordinances which would initiate and naturalize worldly, rebellious men, and make them citizens of the kingdom.

The officers set in the church did not rule in their own wisdom. The ancient principle exemplified in Israel was carried forward and continued. As the theocracy of ancient Israel was governed by the will of God as revealed by revelation through his prophets, so the New Testament church was governed by the Holy Spirit as it guided and instructed the officers of the church. REVELATION IS ESSENTIAL AND INDISPENSABLE in the kingdom of God, if that kingdom is to be governed by God.

We do not have to search very far in the book of Acts to discover that this Spirit was in operation in the early church. The sixth chapter of Acts tells how the first deacons were chosen by the apostles, acting under the direction of this Spirit. In the 8th chapter of Acts that Spirit directed the sending of Peter and John to Samaria and directed Philip to a meeting with the eunuch. In the 9th chapter of Acts, the Spirit sent Ananias to Saul; and in the tenth chapter of same Spirit directed Peter to go to Cornelius -- the first Gentile convert to the church. When dissension arose over some aspects of the Jewish law, a church council was held. When the decision was announced, it was prefaced with the words, "It seemed good unto the Holy Ghost, and to us..." (Acts 15:28) God was ruling in his church by his Spirit, revealed through his officers set in the church.

These officers of the church and kingdom were also charged with the responsibility of settling difficulties between members. Seemingly, there were no lawsuits in the early church. This is indicated by Paul's censure of the Corinthians for going to law in the 6th chapter of First Corinthians. Jesus had counselled the same procedure when he said that if two men found it impossible to reconcile their differences they should "tell it to the church." At least one example of how a case of misdemeanor had been referred to a church official for settlement is Paul's decision in the 5th chapter of First Corinthians regarding the incestuous man, who was to be expelled from the church fellowship.

There came a time however, when alien forces infiltrated into the church. The church's officers began to emulate the kings of worldly kingdoms, and to exercise worldly power, instead of the power of love, and moral persuasion, and the example of a godly life. They used their offices as a badge of their right to preferment, instead of an opportunity of service. Men were admitted into the church who were not born again, who had never been naturalized into the kingdom. The net cast into the sea had gathered of all kinds. The field which had been sown with good seed became corrupted rather than in the guidance and instruction of the Holy Spirit. They said that revelation had ceased (and it had because men no longer expected it) but they continued to keep up the farce of ruling for God and in his name without this absolute essential of theocracy -- prophets and revelation to proclaim the will and mind of God, and to guide the acts of those set in authority. The church, which had given birth to the infant kingdom, fled into the wilderness, and her child -- the kingdom -- was caught up unto God.

Next Sunday we shall try to show in more detail how the church departed from the ideals of the kingdom, and how the kingdom was lost to the church as it had been lost to ancient Israel, when we discuss, THE APOSTASY AND THE KINGDOM.