

The Church – Purposed of God

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Introduction

Is the church Jesus promised to build a “new kid on the block” in God’s eternal purpose? When Jesus announced to the apostles, “I will build my church” (Mat. 16:18), was He introducing something only recently conceived in Heaven? Is the church a mere afterthought in the mind of Deity? So say many. To those who insist on a future one thousand-year earthly kingdom of the Christ (i.e., dispensational and traditional premillennialists), the idea that God included the church in His plans and purposes from the beginning is heresy.

One’s view of where the church of Christ belongs in God’s Will is no small matter. This subject involves crucial Biblical concepts, implications, and doctrines, affecting one’s overall approach to Scripture study and understanding.

A Grossly Warped Concept

Premillennialists **must** deny the church a place in the eternal plan of God or give up their kingdom theories. They insist that the prophets foretold a **political** Messianic kingdom and that Jesus came to establish such. The apostate and rebellious Jewish leaders, however, rejected Him and His kingdom and crucified Him. The literal kingdom advocates therefore assert that His kingdom plans had to be “postponed” until He can return.

In their view, the church was never in the mind of God until this crisis. The Jews allegedly “surprised” God when they rejected Jesus (so much for the omniscience and absolute foreknowledge of God, not to mention Isa. 53!). His response to this unexpected emergency was the church. Though in their view inferior to the glorious political empire Jesus came to inaugurate, the church must suffice until Jesus can come and establish His kingdom. To the premillennialist, the church can never be more than a substitute, emergency, spur-of-the-moment, temporary entity, loitering in the shadows of the anticipated superior kingdom.

The Church-Kingdom Identity

If the concepts described above are true, the church was hardly the subject of Divine purpose. What shall we say in response to this theological grid that enthralls perhaps ninety-eight percent of Protestantism?

First, the prophets themselves may have envisioned a literal empire as they wrote of the kingdom to come. Clearly, they lacked a perfect understanding of everything they wrote and spoke:

Concerning which salvation the prophets sought and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that *should come* unto you: searching what time or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did point unto, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glories that should follow them. To whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto you, did they minister these things, which now have been announced unto you through them that preached the gospel unto you by the Holy Spirit sent forth from heaven...(1 Pet. 1:10–12).

Thus the **concepts** the Old Testament prophets had concerning the meaning of their inspired messages are not relevant. The **inspiration** of their messages did not imply the full understanding of the **application** of those messages.

Second, the Jews of Jesus' day unquestionably anticipated and yearned for a kingdom like that ruled by David and Solomon—one that would break the despised Roman yoke under which they chafed. Ignorance and misinterpretation of Scripture were rife among first-century Jews (Mat. 13:15; 22:29, 42–46; Mark 12:27; Luke 23:34; Acts 3:17; 8:30–35; 13:27; 1 Cor. 2:8; et al.). The popular Jewish expectations are therefore hardly a credible benchmark for prophetic interpretation. Even the apostles labored under a false conception concerning the kingdom till the day of Jesus' ascension (Mark 10:35–37; Acts 1:6).

Not until the Lord sent the Holy Spirit as their Revealer and Guide were the apostles enabled to comprehend fully and flawlessly the meaning of the prophets (John 14:26; 16:13). Beginning on Pentecost, with great certainty they filled their preaching with these flawless interpretations (Acts 2:16–21, 25–28, 30–31, 34–36; 3:18–25; 4:11; 10:43; 13:33–37; 28:23, 31; et al.). Philip, one of the seven upon whom the apostles imparted prophetic and wonder-working gifts (Acts 6:5–6), understood thereby the true intent of the kingdom prophecies and thus proclaimed them (Acts 8:5–12). Other inspired men besides the apostles likewise wrote these interpretations in the New Testament. The Lord and His inspired spokesmen and writers are the only ones qualified to accurately interpret and apply the Old Testament prophecies.

Third, Jesus identified His church as His kingdom and vice versa. As John the Baptizer did before Him (Mat. 3:1–2), the Lord preached, “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (4:17). He commissioned His apostles to do likewise to their fellow-Jews (10:7). In the same breath in which He said, “I will build my church,” He promised to give Peter the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” (16:18–19). In this same context He declared that, **in the lifetime of His contemporaries**, “the Son of Man would come in his kingdom” (v. 28). He further iterated that they would see His kingdom “come with power” (Mark 9:1; cf. Luke 9:27). Thus when He promised, “I will build my church,” and He preached, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand,” He referred to one institution and one event rather than two.

Does the church have Scriptural authority to observe the Lord's Supper? Under apostolic guidance, congregations in Jerusalem, Troas, and Corinth specifically did so (Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:17–34). By implication, however, every first-century congregation did so, even as Paul taught the same things “everywhere in every church” (1 Cor. 4:17). But the Lord placed His supper **in His kingdom** (Mat. 26:29; Luke 22:29–30). If the church is not the kingdom, we have no authority for now observing the Supper; men cannot Scripturally observe it until the Lord returns and establishes the earthly, material kingdom alleged by the premillennialists. But wait: Paul informed the Corinthian saints that the Lord's supper was/is to be eaten “**till** he [i.e., the Lord] come” (1 Cor. 11:26), not **after** He comes. If the Lord placed His memorial Supper in His kingdom (which He did), and if the inspired apostles ordained its observance by and in His church (which they did), then it **must** follow that **the church is the kingdom of God on earth**.

If Jesus had in mind a political kingdom in His *kingdom-is-at-hand* message, He was uninformed at best or intentionally deceptive at worst, because no such kingdom arose in the apostles' lifetime, nor has it in the intervening twenty centuries. There is no way one can reasonably or Scripturally reconcile *at hand* with the passing of two thousand years—and counting. Premillennialists must decide whether they want to make of the Christ an ignoramus or a liar, or perhaps a lying ignoramus. In either case, He could hardly be the Savior of mankind.

After Jesus fed the 5,000+, the Jews sought to force Him to be the very sort of king the premillennialists crave, but He would have none of it (John 6:15). Demonstrating their appalling hypocrisy, the Sanhedrin later charged Jesus in Pilate's court with seeking such a throne (Luke 23:2; John 19:12). In answer to these false charges, Jesus denied to Pilate in the strongest terms any such aspirations:

Jesus answered, **My kingdom is not of this world**: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is **my kingdom not from hence** (John 18:36, emph. DM).

Have the premillennialists never read this statement by the Lord, or having read it, have they ripped it from their heretical Scofield Bibles?

Fourth, Concerning Jesus, Whom Mary was to conceive, Gabriel assured her: “And the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David” (Luke 1:32). Peter declared on Pentecost that the Father had raised His Son from the tomb and placed Him on David's throne, according to God's promise (Acts 2:29–33; 2 Sam. 7:12–13). This enthronement is not **yet** to occur and His reign to begin **when He returns**, but the enthronement and reign occurred **when He ascended to the Father** (vv. 33–36).

Psalms 110:1 prophesied that the Christ would “sit on the right hand” of the Father, meaning that God would give Him a throne from which He would reign. New Testament preachers and writers frequently (perhaps more than any other prophecy) quoted and/or referenced and applied this prophecy. Without exception, they declared that the Christ was—**at the time that they wrote**—at the Father’s right hand, reigning and ruling (Mark 16:19; Acts 2:34–36; 7:55–56; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20–21; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12–13; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22; et al.). If He does not yet have a kingdom, over what does He reign and rule? *Kingdom* and *church* do not refer to two, but to one entity.

Fifth, Paul decidedly viewed the church and kingdom as one. Surely none will question that his third “prison epistle” was addressed to **the church** at Colossae (Col. 1:2). But note: These brethren were also in **the kingdom**: “[The Father]...delivered [not “will deliver”] us out of the power of darkness, and translated [not “will translate”] us into the kingdom of the Son of his love (v. 13). To be in one was/is to be in the other, for they are the same entity.

Note also that immediately after Paul declared Christ to be reigning at the right hand of the Father (Eph. 1:20–21), without changing the subject, he declared Him to be “...the head over all things to the church, which is his body... (vv. 22–23). To be King over His kingdom and Head of His body, the church, are but two ways of saying the same thing.

Further, the Hebrews writer (whom I believe was Paul), identified the church as “a kingdom that cannot be shaken” and said that his readers **had already received** it (Heb. 12:23, 28; cf. Dan. 2:44). It is clear that Paul both identified the church as the kingdom in various statements, and also taught that the kingdom was in existence in the first century (cf. John’s echo of this fact in Rev. 1:6, 9). Thus when the Lord returns, He will not **set** up His kingdom, but He will **deliver** up His existing kingdom, the church, to the Father (1 Cor. 15:22–24).

The main point of the foregoing material is that the prophesied kingdom that Jesus came to establish **is His church**, which He did establish. Therefore, the church of Christ was in no sense an emergency, temporary, or late-conceived measure. God planned it at least as long ago as He purposed the kingdom of His Son—but there is more.

The Church and God’s Eternal Purpose

The Bible teaches that God knows all the past, present, and future from beginning to end, (His omniscience, which includes His foreknowledge). Actually, with God there are no “past, present, and future” as with us. All are simultaneously before Him in a single, sweeping panorama. In keeping with this understanding of God’s foreknowledge, the Scriptures teach that He foresaw man’s need for a Redeemer and a plan of redemption before He spoke the universe into existence. “Before the foundation of the world” He determined to save sinners through His Son (Eph. 1:3–7). God prepared

an eternal inheritance “from the foundation of the world” for His faithful children (Mat. 25:34). God conceived His plan for our eternal life with Him “before times eternal” (2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 1:2; cf. John 17:24; Rom. 16:25; et al.).

All of the passages above explicitly declare God’s eternal purpose regarding our salvation.

Significantly, Paul includes the church in that Divine eternal purpose:

To the intent that now unto the principalities and the powers in the heavenly places might be made known through **the church** the manifold wisdom of God, according to the **eternal purpose** which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord (Eph. 3:10–11, emph. DM).

This remarkable statement unmistakably teaches that the church is (1) a part of the eternal purpose of God to redeem mankind through Christ Jesus and (2) in its beauty and simplicity, is a demonstration of God’s manifold wisdom.

Conclusion

Those who distinguish the earthly kingdom of Christ from His church must ignore and/or repudiate passage after passage that identify them as one. These misinterpretations have created a grotesque system of theology (far more than a mere isolated “doctrine”). This hermeneutical system destroys the beautiful Scriptural concept of the church of Christ and its essential place in the Divine eternal scheme of redemption, relegating it to relative secondary insignificance. May we ever promote, rather than demote, the church of Christ. It was worth so much to Christ that He paid for it with His blood (Acts 20:28).

[Note: I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the October 2004 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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