

GOD'S KINGDOM IS THE CHURCH

Most people in the religious world today believe that God's Kingdom is either in heaven or that it will be established by Jesus on earth at his 2nd Coming. But what does the evidence show? What do the Scriptures teach? If our goal is to go to heaven, then we must fully understand what God has to say about achieving that goal. We need to know what His kingdom is, when it started, what authority it has and how we gain entrance. Otherwise, we might be going about it all wrong and totally miss the mark. Therefore, it is crucial to know whether or not the kingdom has been established, what it is and how to get in.

Isaiah 2:2-3 and Micah 4:1-2 prophesied that the kingdom would be established in the "last days" in Jerusalem. Hebrews 1:1-2 and Acts 2:16-17 show that the New Testament times are the last days and Jesus confirmed that "repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem." Daniel revealed the historic time God's kingdom would be established while he interpreted King Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Daniel 2:32-44). Daniel had dreams himself during the reign of Belshazzar (Daniel 7 & 8) and the angel Gabriel explicitly spelled out the meanings of the symbols in the dreams and left no doubt that Jesus would establish His kingdom during the time of the Roman Empire (Daniel 8:19-26). Joel proclaimed the events that would signal the kingdom's beginning (Joel 2:28-32) and Peter recalled this proclamation in his first sermon, as the church came into existence (Acts 2:16-21). Jesus said that the kingdom would come with power before some who heard Him speak had died (Matthew 16:28, Mark 9:1, Luke 9:27). He referred to His church in Matthew 16:18 as something not yet in existence and in Luke 10:9-11, Jesus said the kingdom was "near", but not yet here. After His resurrection, Jesus said in Matthew 28:18 that all authority had been given to Him in heaven and on earth, and then announced in Acts 1:6-8 that the apostles would receive the power of the Holy Spirit in order to witness from Jerusalem to all the earth. This was after He had told the apostles in John 14:26 that the Holy Spirit would teach them all things and bring to their remembrance all that He had told them. Furthermore, Jesus said the Holy Spirit would not come to the apostles until He went away (John 16:7). Just after His ascension, on Pentecost, the kingdom of God was established when the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles and Peter delivered the first sermon of the New Testament church (Acts 2:1-4,14-26). The logical sequence, then, is that: 1) The Kingdom was to come with power (Mark 9:1); 2) The Power was to come from the Holy Spirit; 3) The Holy Spirit came on Pentecost; 4) Therefore, the Kingdom came on Pentecost. From that point on the Bible speaks of the church, or kingdom, in the present tense, established and functioning. Examples of this can be seen in Acts 2:47; 5:11; 8:1; 11:22; 13:1; 14:27; Colossians 1:13; Revelation 1:9.

The church is not a manmade institution and the kingdom is not a future hope. They are one and the same, alive today and described by the New Testament in the following ways: 1) The Household of God (I Timothy 3:15); 2) A Royal Priesthood (I Peter 2:9); 3) A Holy Temple (Ephesians 2:19-21); 4) The Body, or Christ's Body (Ephesians 5:23, Colossians 1:18,24); 5) The Kingdom (Colossians 1:13) Obviously, the church is the kingdom, the household of God, the body of Christ and His people. We can't "join" the

church. Nowhere in the New Testament is there an example of someone joining the church or instructions given to anyone to join the church. Acts 2:37-47 and the other conversion experiences given throughout the book of Acts show that those who hear God's Word, confess Jesus as the Son of God and submit to baptism for forgiveness of past sins are added by Jesus to His church. The church is a spiritual kingdom (John 18:36) made up of obedient believers and only those in the church, on God's terms, will be saved on the last day (I Corinthians 15:24, Ephesians 5:27). Hebrews 12:22-29 and Ephesians 4:4-6 ties some of this together and the book of Revelation consistently teaches that only Christians, saints washed in the blood, will be permitted entrance into heaven on judgment day.

But what is the significance of the kingdom being the church? What's the big deal? First of all, greater importance must be placed on our choices in religion. We can no longer worship as we please, "join the church of our choice" or hold just any system of beliefs if Jesus' kingdom is already here. We are now obligated to do what it takes to get added to His church or we are eternally lost. Most people don't want to give up their traditions or long-held belief systems and, so rationalize that God doesn't care about the details of our faith as long as we believe. The kingdom, they say, is something we are all working towards and it will only be established after that final battle between good and evil. To admit that the battle is going on today would require more change than most people are willing to endure. Secondly, the Bible and all it teaches becomes more real and applicable to us, personally, when we understand that the church, as now established, is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecy as well as the completion of Jesus' work while here on earth. When our Lord gave up His spirit on the cross, he uttered the words, "It is finished." (John 19:30) This signaled the end of His work on earth. He didn't say, "It is finished for now," or "It is finished until I come back to establish My kingdom." He said, "It is finished." The Bible teaches that He will not step foot on this world again (I Thessalonians 4:16-17), and those who say or believe Jesus has more work to do on the earth call Him a liar. Jesus defeated Satan when He arose from the dead and He now sits on His throne in heaven, preparing to judge every person for their deeds in the body (II Corinthians 5:10). Finally, there will be no second chance. Hebrews 9:27 says, "And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment." All who reject Jesus (Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, atheists, etc.) are lost (Acts 4:12, John 14:6) and all who profess Jesus yet reject His church will, likewise, be rejected by Him (Matthew 7:21-23). Jesus purchased the church with His blood (Acts 20:28, Revelation 5:9-10) and wishes all to be saved (Acts 10:34-35, I Timothy 2:3-5). But God is just and promises only to save those in the church and only those in the church who persevere until the end (II Thessalonians 1:8-10, I Peter 1:17-25, 4:17-19, Revelation 2:10, 3:5).

There is only one true church. Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, "I will build My church." He didn't say churches. The New Testament church began with the baptism of about 3000 souls on the Day of Pentecost as described in Acts 2. Jesus' apostles established churches over the next 40 or 50 years in accordance with instructions provided by the Holy Spirit, who guided them into ALL truth, as Jesus promised. How those churches were set up and organized is the only way God intended for the church of His Son to function. Deviations from that divine plan add to or take away from Holy writ and the

scriptures clearly teach against such alterations. God's Kingdom IS the church, let there be no doubt, and we must each make sure that we are part of His kingdom, His body, His church (all one and the same). Otherwise, our souls are in grave danger.

-Richard Bartholomew