

Problems in Distinguishing The SPIRITUAL in Reference To the KINGDOM

● *By James E. Gibbons*

JOHN 6:63 is a very interesting Scripture. Jesus said, "It is the spirit that quickeneth [gives life]; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak [that I have just spoken] unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63). The Lord the day before had fed the 5000 on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. This miracle, recorded in all four gospel accounts, was so impressive that the people wanted to make him their king (John 6:15). Now back in Capernaum in the synagogue, he preaches a sermon on the Bread of Life, this falling upon the ears of some who had witnessed the miracle. He says some very unusual and radical things, like, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (6:51). Continuing, "Then Jesus said unto them [the Jews], Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you" (6:53). We further read, "Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is a hard saying; who can hear it?" (6:60). Then the Lord responded with some perplexing questions of his own. "Doth this offend you? What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before?" This is when he said, "It is the spirit that quickeneth [gives life]; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak [that I have just spoken] unto you, they are spirit, and they are life."

The Meaning is Spiritual

Taken literally, we can easily understand how his hearers would be more than taken back by such unusual statements (even becoming startled). Cannibalism, eating his flesh and drinking his blood! He had begun his radical pronouncement by saying that he was the bread that came down from heaven. If this statement was startling, what about the time when they would see this bread go back to heaven? In reference to what he has been saying, he is quick to explain, "The words that I speak [literally, that I have just spoken unto you] unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." In other words, I am talking about something spiritual that would be life-giving and my words are not to be taken literally. It was not a literal eating of the flesh and drinking of the blood of the Son of man. Rather, he is saying that the nature of his teachings is spiritual. This was very much like his parables, stories involving material imagery but having a spiritual meaning (Matthew, chapter 13).

In more ways than one, the Jews of the first century had a problem in distinguishing that which should have been looked upon as spiritual, rather than being earthly or material. This was not limited to them.

Others have had this problem, even being found among many professing Christians of our day. Let us consider this.

THE KINGDOM OF THE CHRIST

The Jews of Jesus' day had a problem in distinguishing that the kingdom of the Messiah would be a spiritual kingdom and not a political one. Although Isaiah 53 was part of their Scriptures, the crucifixion of the Christ was something they could not accept. They expected an earthly king, a world ruler. Consequently, the apostle Paul said that the preaching of the cross was a "stumbling block" to them (1 Corinthians 1:23). It didn't fit into their preconceived notions. And many today have much the same problem. They think that Christ failed to set up his earthly kingdom while here, and that things have sort of been kept on hold. Their thoughts are that when he comes back he will actually set up such a kingdom and reign over the earth.

The Language of the Old Testament

The language of the Old Testament, without reading the rest of the story, might lead us to believe this. In dealing with the Jews in bringing about His plan of salvation (Genesis 12:1-3; 22:18; Acts 2:25, 26), God had promised David that of his seed there would be someone for ever upon his throne. Notice the statement in Psalms 89:3 and 4, "I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant, *Thy seed will I establish for ever, and build up thy throne to all generations.*" Starting with 2 Samuel 7:16, this promise is repeatedly found throughout the Old Testament. Other such Scriptures are Isaiah 9:6 and 7; 11:1-10; Jeremiah 23:5 and 6; 33:14-17; Ezekiel 37:24-28. All of these references sound like David and a physical throne is what is involved. But physically there is no throne of David in the world today, nor is there a descendant or descendants of David ruling upon the earth, although the Scriptures say that someone would be reigning for ever. How do we explain this?

The New Testament makes this plain. The Old Testament was largely a physical system, foretelling and anticipating a spiritual one. Although it was foretelling spiritual things, it was largely clothed in physical language. Even the earthly kingdom of the Jewish people was an antitype of the coming eternal and spiritual kingdom of the Messiah. We only have to study the New Testament to see how it all fits into place.

The Angel's Announcement

When the fullness of time was accomplished that Christ should come into the world, we read of the angel appearing to Mary. He said, "Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and *the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end*" (Luke 1:30-33). At

this point, it seems from what we read here, nothing is said to distinguish that this kingdom would be spiritual. But we read on.

The Kingdom was “At Hand”

Years later we read about John the Baptist, appearing as the forerunner and harbinger of the Christ. “In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, And saying, Repent ye: for *the kingdom of heaven is at hand*. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias [Isaiah], saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Matthew 3:1-3). The quotation in its source can be seen in its fullness in Isaiah 40:3-5 and is repeated more extensively in Luke 3:4-6. “As it is written in the book of the words of Esaias [Isaiah] the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth...” As John was clearing the way for Christ, it sounds like something physically was to take place with the leveling of the terrain and the highway being made straight. But an examination of the Scriptures shows that he is talking about a spiritual preparation. This all fits in with the call for repentance and the announcement of the kingdom being “at hand.” The physical language of prophecy here is applied spiritually.

Jesus Takes Up the Same Message

Then when John the Baptist was cast into prison (Matthew 4:12), Jesus took up the same message. We read, “From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, *Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (4:17). In contrast with the other gospel writers, Matthew is unique in referring to the kingdom as the “kingdom of heaven” (although he does call it the kingdom of God, Matthew 6:33, etc.). The other gospel writers simply call it the kingdom of God. And Mark, referring to the same incident as Matthew, says, “Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel (Mark 1:14-15). This plainly shows us that “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” mean the same thing. This kingdom was “at hand.” In other words, its establishment was imminent—“at hand” (just around the corner). On another occasion, Jesus said, “Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power” (Mark 9:1).

Christ’s Teachings Were Spiritual

The teachings of Jesus as found in the four gospel accounts all point to a spiritual kingdom, not a political one. Check out the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). We see this in his teachings in the parables. This can be seen in how he says one enters this kingdom.

The Parables of Christ

In his parables, the Lord repeatedly says, "The kingdom of heaven is like unto" thus and so (Matthew 13:24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47; 18:23; 20:1; 22:2; 25:1, 14). Nowhere is there the overture, or even undertones, of that which is political. Do these declarations sound political? "Behold, a sower went forth to sow..." "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field..." "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed..." "The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven..." "The kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field..." "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls..." "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea..." "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants..." "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard..." "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son..." "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom..." "The kingdom of heaven is as a man traveling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods..." No analogy will make any of this fit into a political picture. His teachings were spiritual.

A Spiritual Entrance into the Kingdom

The disciples of Christ, who had a hard time seeing beyond the Jewish concept of an earthly kingdom, questioned Jesus one time, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Then we read the response and unfolding answer of the Lord to them. "And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:1-4). Later on Jesus would say, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:14). Further showing the spiritual nature of entrance into the kingdom, after the rich young ruler went away sorrowful, Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24). This prompted the disciples to ask, "Who then can be saved" (19:25). The kingdom had to do with salvation. It is a spiritual matter.

The Church and the Kingdom

A very interesting section of Scripture is found in Matthew 16:13-20. Here the kingdom of the Messiah is more distinctly defined. To bring great truths out in the open, Jesus repeatedly questioned his disciples as to his identity. When Simon Peter finally gave the right answer, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," the Lord responded to him, "Upon this rock [this truth] I will build my church: and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 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.” Here building his church and the use of the keys of the kingdom of heaven are thrown along beside one another. With the use of the “keys” the door was opened whereby entrance into the kingdom was made possible. Initially this took place on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and with the Gentiles later at the household of Cornelius (Acts 10) (and Peter was the leading spokesman each time). Christ had said on another occasion that some of them standing there would not “taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power” (Mark 9:1). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit took place on the day of Pentecost, with powerful and miraculous manifestations (the kingdom came with power). Peter and the other apostles “loosed” and “bound” in their preaching and in what took place (Matthew 16:19; 18:18; John 20:21-23; Acts 2:14, 37-42, 47). Those who repented and were baptized were “added to the church” by the Lord. Later on in Colossians 1:13 Paul would write, speaking of the common experience of all in becoming Christians, that God “hath delivered us from the power [authority, dominion, kingdom] of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son.” Yes, in Christ’s declaration of intent about his church (Matthew 16), in its fulfillment (Acts 2), and in the statement made by Paul here, the church and the kingdom are synonymous terms. The kingdom of Christ is spiritual, not political.

Christ Raised, Seated and Reigning on the Throne of David

Acts 2 is the focal point in the beginning of the church, as the kingdom of God came with power on the day of Pentecost. Later on with the outpouring of the Spirit upon the household of Cornelius, Peter would say, “The Holy Ghost [Spirit] fell on them, as on us *at the beginning*” (Acts 11:15). Pentecost was the beginning, and Peter in Acts 2 explained what was taking place. Jesus had ascended back to heaven and had “shed forth this, which” they were now seeing and hearing. He quotes from a psalm of David (Psalms 16:8-11), referring to the resurrection of someone, which he said could not be David. He was still buried and his tomb was still there. Peter explains that this has to do with the Lord’s resurrection. He elaborates upon what David wrote, explaining it explicitly. “Therefore [David] being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him [Psalms 89:3,4], that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, *he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ...* Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that *God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ*” (Acts 2:30-36). Christ is now the seed of David seated upon the throne of David, according to the apostle Peter. This took place with the Lord’s resurrection and ascension to heaven. He is now reigning as the Christ.

The Preaching of the Kingdom in the Book of Acts

The following Scripture references show that the preaching of the kingdom was part of the gospel message in the book of Acts.

- **Philip Preaching in Samaria:** “But when they believed Philip *preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God*, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women” (Acts 8:12).
- **Paul at Ephesus:** “And he went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, *disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God*” (Acts 19:8).
- **Paul to the Ephesian Elders:** “And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone *preaching the kingdom of God*, shall see my face no more” (Acts 20:25).
- **Paul to the Jews at Rome:** “And when they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging; to whom *he expounded and testified the kingdom of God*, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening” (Acts 28:23).
- **Paul Under House Arrest as a Prisoner at Rome:** “And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, *Preaching the kingdom of God*, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him” (Acts 28:30,31).

When Paul preached in Thessalonica in the synagogue of the Jews, he “reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.’” (Acts 17:2, 3, NKJV). The unbelieving Jews seized upon these words to bring charges against Paul before the Gentile courts, asserting that they “do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus” (17:7). Of course to the Roman ears, the distorted charges by the Jews came across in the wrong way and they were very greatly disturbed by what they heard. However, the Christ Paul preached was a suffering Christ, who purchased the church with his own blood (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25). The Romans had nothing to fear of an insurrection or a rival kingdom. Although Christ told Pilate that was why he was born, to be a king, he said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight...” (John 18:36, 37). His kingdom was, and is, a spiritual kingdom (not an earthly kingdom).

The Overall Extended and Expanded Concept of the Kingdom

This article would not be complete without considering the overall extended and expanded concept of the kingdom. Although the kingdom of God is spoken of as being now, it is also spoken of as being hereafter.

Although it is on earth, it is and will be in heaven. After his resurrection, Jesus declared, “All power [authority] is given unto me in heaven and in earth” (Matthew 28:18). As we noticed, he was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven to be enthroned on the right hand of the Father, occupying the throne of David in the expanded spiritual sense. Ephesians 1:20-23 and Colossians 1:13-20 lay out the extended and expanded view of the authority and reign of Christ. (Read this amazing section of Scripture; also, look at Philippians 2:9-11 and 1 Peter 3:22). It involves heaven and earth. It is for time and eternity. It is now and hereafter. God incarnate, our Savior, now resurrected and glorified, is reigning.

The Kingdom on Earth And the Kingdom in Heaven

The church is called the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. We are much like a colony of heaven implanted in the earth today. Jesus had taught his disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). As we noticed, the kingdom came and is here now. And when we are “born again,” we enter this kingdom of heaven (John 3:1-5). However, we are still upon the earth, although in an alien land, but Paul tells us that “our conversation [literally, our *citizenship*] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself” (Philippians 3:20, 21). Didn’t our Lord say, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also”? (John 14:3). Our life on earth is lived in our physical bodies and in these bodies we are in the kingdom of heaven right now, but in these physical bodies we cannot enter the eternal phase of this kingdom that will be in heaven itself. Paul said that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God,” and that we will be clothed with a new, eternal spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:49-53). With our new bodies we have “an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:4; 2 Corinthians 5:1). And Christ reigns and has extended authority in heaven and on earth and all phases of it. How amazing! Yes, finally everything is climaxed in the kingdom being presented up to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24), and that brings us to our next point.

The Kingdom of Heaven Yet to Come

Paul adjured Timothy, “I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick [living] and the dead *at his appearing and his kingdom*” to preach the Word (2 Timothy 4:1-3). Likewise in verse 18 of this chapter, Paul is confident that the Lord would deliver him and preserve him “*unto his heavenly kingdom*.” James states that poor Christians were rich in faith and “*heirs of the kingdom* which he hath promised to them that love him” (James 2:5). In 2 Peter 1:5-12, Christians are admonished by the apos-

tle to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord, adding one virtuous thing right after another. In doing this they would make their “calling and election sure.” And, thus, finally “an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly *into the everlasting kingdom* of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” We are in the kingdom of heaven right now, but there is a sense in which we are yet to enter this kingdom. That is the eternal phase of it. It comes at the end of a life well lived, with the second coming of Christ and the Day of Judgment. Beyond this land of death, this veil of wrath and tears, awaits “an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:3-6). It is spoken of as an “everlasting kingdom.” It is yet to come.

Those Who Will Not Be in the Kingdom to Come

Paul, likewise, tells us who will “not inherit the kingdom of God,” thus showing us that the inheritance has not taken place yet and this kingdom is yet to come (verifying what we have just said). Notice these revealing Scriptures.

- “Know ye not that the unrighteous *shall not inherit the kingdom of God*? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate [homosexuals], nor abusers of themselves with mankind [sodomites], nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, *shall inherit the kingdom of God*” (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10).
- “Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things *shall not inherit the kingdom of God*” (Galatians 5:19-21).
- “For this ye know, that no whoremonger [fornicator], nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, *hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God*” (Ephesians 5:5).

Concluding Remarks

There is much more that could be written on this subject of distinguishing the spiritual from the physical in reference to the kingdom of the Messiah. In fact, this theme could be enlarged and applied to other matters. That which claims to be the church in many places today seems to have become sidetracked from actually why the church came into being in the first place. All kinds of programs and even non-religious activities have supplanted its distinctive spiritual function and role in the community. But, we trust, this article will suffice for now to show that the kingdom of heaven is indeed that, not some earthly or political kingdom yet to be set up. The great Scriptures anticipating the Christ have been fulfilled. He is now enthroned and reigning upon the throne of David. **[End]** □