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The Church and God's Kingdom

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How does the church relate to the kingdom of God? A study of the relationship between kingdom and ecclesiological terminology reveals that the church continues to hold a prominent position of responsibility and blessing in the outworking of God's kingdom plan. It forms one layer of the kingdom of God as described in the Bible.

Basic Elements of the Kingdom

In simple terms, any kingdom could be characterized as consisting of a ruler, a realm (either political or geographic), and a set of rules (laws specific to that kingdom). A single king might indeed rule over multiple realms with different sets of rules that may overlap or remain distinctive to that realm. Therefore, it would not be surprising to discover that the Bible presents the kingdom of God as multifaceted. Viewing the kingdom of God as consisting of overlapping layers that include some common elements and some distinctive elements will help determine the relationship between the kingdom and the church.

Distinct Layers of God's Kingdom

That the kingdom of God as described in the Bible consists of multiple layers with both common and distinctive elements is evident from a review of broadly recognized aspects of God's rule over His

creation. Paul hints at this layering of the kingdom when he writes about the future resurrection, stating, "Then the end will come, when he (Christ) hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power" (1 Corinthians 15:24).

The Universal Kingdom of God

It seems appropriate to begin a description of the layers of God's Kingdom by identifying the eternal, sovereign, universal kingdom of God. This layer overshadows all other aspects of the kingdom in the Bible. God in His sovereignty rules as King over His entire creation, accomplishing His will for His glory (1 Chronicles 29:11; Psalm 47:2; Psalm 145:13; Jeremiah 10:10; Ephesians 1:11). This universal kingdom has God as its ruler, the whole universe as its realm, and the sovereign will of God as its rule.

The Political Kingdom of Israel

Beneath God's universal kingdom lies a kingdom layer that includes the mediatorial rule of human kings. Most prominent in the Old Testament is, of course, the political kingdom of the nation Israel. Over a period of about four hundred years the nation of Israel existed under the rule of a line of kings of widely varying spiritual character and political acumen. The realm of this kingdom included God's chosen people living in the land of promise (1 Kings 4:21). The rule under which these kings were to operate was the Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 17:18-20). To the greatest of Israel's kings—David—God made the promise of an eternal dynasty, declaring, "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:16). This promise would find its fulfillment in the messianic descendant of David and the messianic kingdom, an extension of the political kingdom of Israel.

The Messianic Kingdom

Anticipating the ultimate anointed king, the people of God were eager for the arrival of the Messiah. Jesus, as a descendant of David, entered the scene of human history as the fulfillment of these messianic expectations. He proclaimed, "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). The

layer of God's kingdom that Jesus described as "near" was an extension of the political kingdom of Israel but under the unending rule of God's Messiah. As an extension of the kingdom of Israel, the Messiah would reign over God's chosen people, the Jews. His rule would spread over all the earth (Psalm 2:8-10). The rules for this layer of the kingdom would continue to be the ancient Mosaic Law as interpreted by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and tempered by grace (John 1:17).

However, this messianic kingdom never came to fruition during the earthly ministry of Jesus. While the kingdom was "near" in the person of the king, it was not yet "here" because the Jewish people rejected their king. The kingdom of God in its messianic form had come "among" the people inasmuch as Jesus, the king, lived among the people (Luke 17:21). While some translations take the Greek preposition *entos* in Luke 17:21 to mean that the kingdom of God was "within," it seems preferable based on the context to translate *entos* as "among."¹ Jesus was addressing a group of Pharisees at the time, and it would be hard to imagine Him saying that the kingdom resided within these religious leaders who had rejected His claims.

While He offered the kingdom, that kingdom was not yet established due to unbelief. For this reason Jesus could teach His disciples to pray with future anticipation, "Your kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10). In His parable of the ten minas Jesus corrected the misimpression that the kingdom of God would "appear at once" (Luke 19:11-12). The fact of the delayed kingdom also accounts for Jesus' response to His disciples at the time of His ascension. The disciples asked, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Jesus responded by telling them that it was not for them "to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). The arrival of the messianic kingdom would have to wait for the return of the messianic king.

The Spiritual Kingdom of Christ

While Jesus' reign on earth over His messianic kingdom awaits a future day, He still reigns as a king over the hearts of His followers today. This layer of God's kingdom consists of an inner spiritual kingdom. Jesus is the ruler, those who believe in Him

constitute His realm, and the law of Christ serves as the rule for this kingdom.

Paul referred to a present form, or layer, of the kingdom of God, an inner spiritual kingdom characterized by righteousness, peace, and joy (Romans 14:17-18; compare 1 Corinthians 4:20; Colossians 1:13-14). It may, in fact, be this inner spiritual kingdom that Jesus had in mind when He told Pontius Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). Likewise, when Jesus used parables to describe the "secrets of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 13:11) He likely had in mind this inner spiritual kingdom, a kingdom characterized by receptive hearts (the seed planted on good soil) and growing influence (the yeast permeating the batch of dough).

The Church as God's Kingdom

During His earthly ministry Jesus both predicted and promised, "I will build my church," and then immediately pledged to give Peter "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:18-19). The concepts of the church and the kingdom go hand in hand. By comparing various layers of God's kingdom it becomes possible to identify the inner spiritual kingdom with the church itself. This spiritual kingdom of God has spiritual discipleship as its primary task, in contrast to a social Christendom agenda. As F. F. Bruce states, referring to the early church, "The kingdom of God which they were commissioned to proclaim was the good news of God's grace in Christ."² Spiritual surrender to the king of this spiritual kingdom takes center stage in the work of the church. The church, therefore, is prominent and the gospel of salvation is preeminent in this layer of God's kingdom. The church of Jesus Christ remains the focal point of God's blessing and kingdom work in the world today.

¹ Walter L. Liefeld, "Luke," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 8:997.

² F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*. Rev. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 35-36.