

The Church and the Kingdom

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It's just futile for me to try to sweep certain issues under the rug. They're still there and I know it and it bothers me. One of these has to do with the thinking and teaching abroad concerning the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the Church of God. Before proceeding further, let me say, as an aside, that I think we set ourselves up for continuing misunderstanding if we do not consider the question in a larger context that would include the Family of God and the House of God, if not more.

In my own experience, just about the time I think that I've been given a "new handle" on a matter of spiritual importance, I discover that the new handle, though handier than the one it replaced, is not as handy as I thought. Usually, upon reflection, I realize that there was, from the beginning, a discomfort, a warning flag, as it were, in my spirit, about the new doctrinal premise, and that, though this particular tower may not be leaning nearly as badly as the one it replaced, it is leaning enough, so that, if one kept trying to extend it, kept trying to build upward upon it, it would eventually topple over.

As is often the case, I sat down at my keyboard to at least make a stab at expressing emerging thoughts, but not quite sure exactly what I'd end up writing, so that I somewhat fit the biblical description, "...if haply they might feel after," or in a more updated translation, "...if perhaps they might grope for...." (Acts 17:27)

Anyway, here goes: There is a concept abroad today that assumes, emphasizes and builds upon the premise that the Church is, by some definition, inferior to, or at least, less than, the Kingdom. This view insists upon speaking of things that clearly are not the Church of God, as if they were; and by so doing, contributes to confusion.

The word "church" has been stolen by the one who is a thief and a robber, and then used to describe a man-made system, a perversion of "the fellowship of the saints," an institutionalized religious culture, a

false bond of relationship among believers, which Jesus and the apostles did not, nor do not, recognize, or speak of, as the Church. Frankly, it irritates me when a good word is given over to be used as it was not originally intended.

A classic example of that can be found, for instance, glaringly, within the contemporary American Hispanic culture. My understanding is that the term "machismo" originally described manhood in very noble terms. It described a true man, a man of courage, maturity and responsibility, who accepted and carried out wisely his role in the family and community. He was a man of character and strength, who had the deepest respect for womanhood, and was a man who could be counted on.

Now, its shortened version, "macho" refers to everything but the above.

It is used to describe cowardly punks, without character, incapable of responsibility, dishonoring of women, a scourge upon their community, respecting nothing but their own psychotic rage. That classic abuse of a good word came to me as so illustrative of my point that I just had to use it; so please, dear reader, do not, by any stretch of the imagination, read into it any denigration of a wonderful people for whom I, personally, have deep affection, being of Latin blood myself.

In our reading of the new testament, particularly the epistles of Paul, we must be careful to discriminate between that which was written to the Church to describe what it truly is, and that which was written to remind it what it was not. When we read of certain things being condemned concerning the Church, we must understand that those things are condemned because they intrinsically do not belong to that which constitutes the Church, and are thus exposed as alien to its nature.

Dear God, let us not attribute to the Church of God that which intrinsically is opposed to and foreign to all that it truly is.

When the apostle Paul equates the Church with the Body of Christ, as he clearly does in Eph. 1:22,23, giving us a definition of the Church from God's perspective, we must not "cheat" and add to it or take away from it. He is very clear: "...the Church, which is His Body,

the fulness of Him who fills all in all." As we trace Paul's thought in that letter, we see him proceeding from the Church as the Body of Christ, to the Church as the Bride of Christ. What he lays out is the anti-type of Adam and Eve. The one proceeding out from the other, but being of the same generic stock. The Lord loves the Church, His Bride, as He does the Church, His own Body.

The Body of Christ and the Bride of Christ are not two different entities, but expressions of the One gender- completeness of Personhood which is the Christ. This Christ is "the Savior of the Body" (Eph. 5:23) and the One who "loved the Church and gave Himself up for HER" (Eph. 5:25, emphasis mine). Whoa, dear ones, we're treading on holy ground here! He did not give Himself for that which we indiscriminately call "the church"; He gave Himself that She might be delivered from that kind of impersonation.

Let's take a deep breath, and reconsider some of our statements about the Church. Dare we, for even semantical convenience, refer to the Church in terms that are offensive to the Spirit of Christ as He/She is revealed in the words above? When I read such words of divine devotion, I cannot connect them to that which we carelessly call "the church." I desire to make the point, and speak, write and live according to the principle that what is contradictory to, yet attaching itself to the Church, IS NOT THE CHURCH!

I, for one, refuse to give over the word "Church" to those who have stolen it and then to use it myself to describe a systemic, artificial connecting of humanity in a way that defames the very idea of THE Church. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that the word itself is holy.

the original Greek word translated commonly as "church" is a word taken by the Spirit from the Greek culture to convey the idea of a calling out unto assembling for the determination of matters of state.

To repeat: neither the Greek word or the English word commonly called upon to translate the Greek are in themselves holy, in fact, the choice of "church" as the equivalent of "ekklesia" is a poor one. A much better choice would be simply "gathering," including the implication of the gathering being authoritatively summoned. But

apart from all that consideration, what is being described is holy, and we should not use whatever might be our translation preference to describe the unholy.

The word "ekklesia," as God has chosen to use it regarding what is nothing less than the extension of His incarnation is, in that context, sanctified. One might conceivably find the word, traceable to its Greek origin, as quite appropriate to describe any kind of particular assembling in response to a call for purposes of importance to a community, but that is another completely a different matter.

The argument does not change if we determine that the English word "church" is a poor choice to translate the Greek, "ekklesia." Whether we choose to speak of the "Assembly," the "Congregation," the "Gathering" or whatever, the issue is the same: Do not confuse what a thing is. If Jesus speaking, supposedly in Aramaic, or Paul, supposedly writing in Greek, speak of that against which the gates of hell shall not prevail, and is the very corporate reproduction and manifestation of the Son-Personhood of God on earth, let us not speak or write in such a way as to IDENTIFY the Church WITH the very gates of hell--- to identify it with that which is anything but God incarnate in the Christ.

Now, to a matter of specific concern within this larger context: In this hour, as the Spirit of Truth is further revealing the unfolding of the eonian purpose of God, in our attempt to structure that revelation theologically, we may attempt to hang the truth on conceptual hooks that cannot bear the weight of such revelation. This syndrome shows up in the notion that the Church will give way to the Kingdom and that we are leaving the age of the Church and entering the age of Kingdom.

May I suggest a far different relationship between the two, which are not two, but one Reality, in twofold expression? Further than that, the expression is really manifold, but for our present purpose we will consider only the twofold. I only mean to nudge us all toward a more accurate direction of consideration. I am not, by any means, claiming to present an exhaustive treatise here:

As Father and Son have their Being in and as a "mutual abode"; the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father, so the Kingdom and the Church do not stand in the kind of distinction and certainly not in the kind of contradistinction that is suggested or even affirmed by much extant teaching. They are One in each other.

The life of the Church vibrates with the dynamic of the rule of God (the Kingdom), and the life of the Kingdom possesses its vitality in the organic Body/Bride-nature (the Church). And they both are Family in nature---and here we've gotten into the more manifold expression issue:

It's an organic (Body/Bride Church) Kingdom and a beneficently ruled (Kingdom) Church/Body/Bride: and it's all "one big happy family."

It has always been delightfully revealing to me how the Lord trips up our very controlled thinking processes by little insertions in scripture with a wording that we would not expect, in order to jar our needle out of the groove in which it's stuck. For instance, you would think that the apostle Paul would write of "The God of glory, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

But he doesn't. Expressing what seems to me to contain a teasing "wink"

from God, he writes of "The God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of Glory." To our thinking He would seem to be mixing things up. God is a God of glory, certainly we would agree, but "the Father of Glory?" Hey Lord, are you trying to confuse us?

Jesus is the Son of the Heavenly Father, right? Certainly right. But we don't often think of the Father as Jesus' God. Likewise, the Lord slips one in on us in Jesus' statement, "...I will build my Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). Lord, wouldn't it have been better to say, "I will build my kingdom and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it?" After all, "kingdom" seems more expressive of that entity which aggressively attacks hell, and in a sense, it is. But, you see, the Spirit is telling us that the Church and the Kingdom are One.

Most of my readers understand that the greater Christ of the new testament is One Head and Body. The Head can be distinguished

from the Body, but, on the other hand, it (He) is both the Head and the very constitution of the Body as its Life. Though we don't usually think of Christ as being the Kingdom, He is! Christ is the King, the all-inclusive Citizenry, and the Domain and Territory of the Kingdom. One dear old saint I knew years ago said, "The Kingdom of God is Christ universalized."

"Church" speaks of that assembly/gathering-quality of the Kingdom, of the Sons of God called out to assemble for matters of State. This is a Gathering like none other, the Gathering which determines all things everywhere in all dimensions, in short, the Kingdom of God. This is a Kingdom, so full of Family love that it is always getting together, and when it congregates and decides things concerning the earth, kings are raised up and brought down, kingdoms are caused to thrive and then are dashed to pieces, and a baby gasps its first breath as a little bit of the Kingdom of God comes to earth.

I believe there is a beautiful and simple picture in the Old Testament that sums up what I'm trying to say: The promised land was the whole area of Canaan, and within the land, there was the holy city, Jerusalem.

Taken together, clearly, they are a type of the Kingdom and the Church respectively. Brother Witness Lee often spoke and wrote of the promised land of Canaan as the all-inclusive type of Christ, for He, by His life, constitutes both the Kingdom and the Church.

Now on one hand it appears simply that the Church (Jerusalem) is within the Kingdom (Canaan), and thus a smaller element and a lesser matter than the Kingdom, until you remember that within the city was Mount Zion, the fortress and home of the King, who is the personification and singular, unique embodiment of the Kingdom..

Think with me now. You see, on one hand, the Church (the city) is contained within the Kingdom (the land), but on the other hand, the very heart (Mt. Zion) of the Kingdom, is within the Church (the city). Yes, it is true that the Church is within the Kingdom, but it is also true that the very abode of the King, and the center and headquarters of the Kingdom is within the Church, and seen there in exalted elevation.

As with the Father and the Son, so also it is with the Church and the Kingdom; it is a matter of mutual abode. The Church is in the Kingdom, and the Kingdom is in the Church. It is absolutely impossible to separate them. When the true Church truly assembles, truly, Kingdom rule proceeds from its heights, and where the rule of the King is, there, congregating around that rule, is the Church.

For your thoughtful consideration.