

# **THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE HOLY NATION**

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# FOREWORD

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The present testimony of the churches of God in the Fellowship of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, came into being around 1889 and since then the subjects of the kingdom of God and the holy nation have been prominent in their teaching and have featured in their literature. However, these subjects have never been drawn together in one presentation or publication; hence this new book.

Over the years many articles in *Needed Truth*, our teaching magazine, have dealt with the kingdom of God. We gladly acknowledge these and refer particularly to two series, one in 1977 by the late John Drain of Belfast and another in 1957 titled 'Things concerning the Kingdom of God', featuring several authors. In addition, a former editor, the late Tom Hyland, wrote very helpful articles on 'A Holy Nation', which were subsequently produced in booklet form. This is no longer in print, but it, too, has been referred to by the present author, Dr. John Terrell.

It seemed appropriate to bring together the two themes of the kingdom of God and the holy nation - biblical terms used to describe the people of God - for these subjects have so much in common. Now we make it our prayer that their treatment in this publication will be profitable and will stimulate enjoyment of the challenging issues involved. The glory and authority of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ is central, and to Him alone is the praise and honour.

Editors

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

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The twin subjects of the kingdom of God and the holy nation are of great importance in the revelation of Holy Scripture. A right understanding of Scripture on these themes would surely go far in clarifying the vision of Christians today who aspire to a truly biblical unity in service and worship. The vital truths associated with the kingdom of God and the holy nation have been prominent among the churches of God since they came into existence again just over a hundred years ago.

To the Church of God in Rome Paul wrote, 'For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the scriptures we might have hope' (Rom.15:4). Among the things 'written aforetime' were many statements concerning God's desire for, and purpose in, a holy nation, a people for Himself, taken out of the world, a kingdom of priests, a dwelling place among men, and a sanctuary where He may be worshipped '... in spirit and truth' (John 4:24). Those golden threads of divine purpose are intimately interwoven and find expression in the teaching of the Old Testament about Israel, and in the New Testament about the people of God gathered in churches of God, a holy temple in the Lord, fitly framed together (Eph. 2:21).

Many lines of teaching concerning Israel as God's Old Testament kingdom and nation find a parallel in the New Testament concerning the '... people for God's own possession' today (1 Pet.2:9). Certain differences will be noted in the expression of the kingdom of God from age to age, though the principles which undergird God's kingdom do not change over time. They are invariably rooted in faith and obedience.

## **Nation and Kingdom**

The concept of a nation emerges early in Scripture. To Abraham, the man of faith, on whom so many of God's ambitions for mankind centred, God declared, 'I will make of thee a great nation' (Gen.12:2). Consideration will be given presently to the issue of nationhood in God's plans for the human race. Genesis 12 marks a crucial stage in God's pursuit of this purpose. It was only when His promise to Abraham had taken shape, and a separated, consecrated people had taken its special place on the world stage, that God presented to them the challenge of kingdom status. That was at Sinai, as recorded in Exodus chapter 19; and it is vital to note that the challenge and offer was being made to a redeemed people, who had been '... all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea' (1 Cor.10:2). It was the establishment of a covenant relationship, solemnly based on a commitment to obedience; and the seal of that relationship was the blood that was sprinkled on the altar, the book and the people (Ex.24:7,8).

So it was that the Holy Spirit guided Peter to say to the saints in the churches to which he wrote, that they were '... elect ... according to ... obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ' (1 Pet.1:1,2). The apostle then went on in the same letter to address the disciples of the Dispersion as '... living stones ... built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood' (2:5); and as '... an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession' (2:9). In the following pages the origins and purpose are traced of the principles of nationhood and kingdom in the Word; and the character and constitution of the holy nation and the kingdom of God are examined. In particular, clear New Testament guidelines are sought for the present-day expression of these divine institutions, their service, witness, conflict, heritage and destiny.

## CHAPTER TWO: ORIGINS AND PURPOSE

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The earliest ordering of people into nations followed an act of judgment on God's part. It was after the flood that Genesis chapter 10 records of the sons of Japheth, that 'Of these were the isles of the nations divided in their lands, every one after his tongue; after their families, in their nations' (10:5). Similar words are written of the sons of Ham, and of Shem. 'These are the families of the sons of Noah, after their generations, in their nations: and of these were the nations divided in the earth after the flood' (10:32).

The grouping of mankind into nations was consolidated by the judgment of Babel when, '... the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth' (Gen.11:9), and men were scattered abroad over the earth. In due course the principles of kingdom and kingship emerged as a form of government and constitution for many nations. The first mention of a kingdom was that of Nimrod, an early descendent of Ham. Also, many relatively small city states had a designated monarch. Genesis 14 refers to the kings of Sodom, Salem and others.

### **Nationhood and a Nation**

The purpose and destiny which God had in view for the nations was soon discarded by mankind in general. Acts 17:26,27 states that, '... he made of one every nation of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed seasons, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek God, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.' Sadly, the nations took little account of such divine purposes, and pursued their destinies without regard to His laws, and in spite of His revelation of Himself to them.

‘Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God manifested it unto them’ (Rom.1:19). Since men ‘... hold down the truth in unrighteousness’, ‘the wrath of God is revealed from heaven.’ The remainder of this solemn passage in Romans 1:18-23 extends the indictment that, ‘... knowing God, they glorified him not as God’. Human history is deeply scarred by the results of mankind exchanging the truth of God for a lie, and rejecting His vision of human society in favour of their own. The nations of the ‘fertile crescent’, the great arc of land stretching for some 1,200 miles from Mesopotamia in the east to Egypt in the west, nations which had important relations with Israel, were corrupted in varying degrees. But God had in view from early days a nation for His own possession, a holy nation. We have seen how this was initially announced to Abraham, and began to take shape as the days of the patriarchs progressed. The people of Israel in Egypt were without a land or a king, yet from the earliest days of His purposes for humanity, God had foreseen nations and a nation separated from the others.

Abraham’s whole life from the day God called him, gave ample witness to the requirement of a separated walk with God. So with the nation which God promised to make from him. Separation was pivotal in God’s purposes. Genesis 10 refers to the early establishment of nations: Deuteronomy 32:8,9, however, declares very clearly that, ‘When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the children of men, he set the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel. For the Lord’s portion is his people.’

Scripture amply records the dismal failure of human governments to achieve their goal of a peaceful, stable, and prosperous society. Experience through all the centuries only confirms this with multiplying tragedy and sadness. At the end of the twentieth century from Christ, nationhood remains at the top of the world’s agenda, and the pursuit of nationalism seems only to lead to incalculable human suffering, as jealousy and bitterness corrupt every effort towards peace and unity.

## Prophetic Vista

These sombre realities are well exposed in the biblical record of God's dealings with nations and kingdoms in Daniel's day, and all in the context of failure on the part of Israel. Chapter 2 of Daniel's prophecy records the remarkable story of God's self-revelation to the king of Babylon, a nation and kingdom with a monarch of extraordinary power and authority. The insight given to Nebuchadnezzar concerned not only his own reign and the form of Gentile governments and empires which would succeed him, but also established the role of the Most High God in all human history concerning 'what shall be in the latter days'. God enabled Daniel to interpret to Nebuchadnezzar the image of his dreams with its head of fine gold, and its other parts of silver, brass, iron and clay. Then came the revelation that was central, 'Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them in pieces' (2:34).

And so the overwhelming destructive power of the Christ of God was prophesied against a future world power, perhaps a revived Roman empire. 'And in the days of those kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed, nor shall the sovereignty thereof be left to another people; but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever' (2:44). So Daniel's prophecy over-arches the present time, and directs attention to the coming millennial kingdom of Christ on earth, as spoken of in Revelation 11:15, 'The kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ: and he shall reign for ever and ever'. The psalmist declared in ringing terms, 'Why do the nations rage, and the peoples imagine a vain thing? ... He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh ... yet I have set my king upon my holy hill of Zion' (Ps.2:1,4,6).

## A Nation for God



While, however, God was administering His sharp rebuke to the king of Babylon, instructing him that, ‘... the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will’ (Dan.4:32), His own holy nation was languishing in captivity because of their disobedience. The obedience and faith of Abraham had made possible the establishment of the nation of Israel; and their national commitment to abide by God’s law had heralded their constitution as a ‘... kingdom of priests, and an holy nation’ (Ex.19:6). For at Sinai God’s redeemed people learned that to be a worshipping and serving community, according to the decrees and purposes of God, they must make the firm commitment, ‘All that the LORD hath spoken we will do’ (Ex.19:8).

From Abraham to the exodus 430 years had passed. During this time God had proved faithful to His people, as described so graphically in Psalm 105:12-14,23,37,43: ‘When they were but a few ... they went about from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people. He suffered no man to do them wrong; yea, he reprov’d kings for their sakes ... Israel also came into Egypt ... and he brought them forth with silver and gold ... and he brought forth his people with joy, and his chosen with singing.’ And so they came to Sinai, and the solemn covenant was made.

Soon another word of far-reaching importance was spoken to the holy nation, the kingdom of priests: ‘... let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them’. Furthermore, the sanctuary was to be ‘... according to all that I shew thee, the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the furniture thereof, even so shall ye make it’ (Ex.25:8,9). The nationhood, the kingdom, the priesthood, and the sanctuary, God’s dwelling place among His people, were all of a piece in His purposes and plan for those whom He had redeemed and separated to Himself. It will ever be so in God’s desires for a redeemed people, whether in Old Testament times or today.

### **The Kingdom Taken and Given**

A subsequent chapter traces further the scriptural presentation of the kingdom of God in successive expressions. It is helpful at this point to observe that the Lord, when on earth, made it plain that the kingdom can be given, and taken away. Matthew 21:43 states, 'Therefore say I unto you, the kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof'. The nation of Israel did not pass out of existence when the Lord's solemn words were fulfilled, but, in unbelief and rejection of their Messiah, they were no longer constituted the kingdom of God and the guardians of its principles. Though retaining a remarkable national identity, they have been scattered among the nations, suffering persecution of truly holocaust proportions. Yet the restoration of Israel is sure, as declared in Romans chapter 11, '... a hardening in part hath befallen Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in; and so all Israel shall be saved' (vv.25,26).

## CHAPTER THREE: CHARACTER - MORAL AND HISTORICAL

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It has already been noted that the faith and obedience of Abraham were prerequisites for the fulfilment of God's purposes for Israel as nation and kingdom. This was reinforced repeatedly in the history of the nation, and nowhere more strongly than at Sinai. Moreover, these basic principles of God's kingdom are unchanging, and so to be expected in operation in the expression of the holy nation and kingdom of God today. The essential moral character of the kingdom of God is expressly stated in Romans 14:17, where certain beautiful traits are laid alongside the basics of obedience and trust; 'For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit'. These virtues were clearly expected by God from His Old Testament people Israel.

### **A Law for Righteousness**

The law of God as given to Moses for Israel was constructed so as to develop the characteristics indicated in Romans 14:7 among God's people. The moral code from Sinai, as well as much of the ceremonial also, required of the people the personal and national righteousness which alone could please a God of infinite purity. The word of Leviticus 11:45 was uncompromising: 'I am the LORD that brought you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy'. Before the apostle Peter spoke in his first epistle to the disciples of their role as spiritual house, priesthood, holy nation, he was at pains in chapter 1 to emphasise both righteousness and obedience.

Of the latter he wrote, 'Seeing ye have purified your souls in your obedience to the truth ...' (1 Pet.1:22). He had already quoted Leviticus 11 to

them as summing up his injunction, 'As children of obedience, not fashioning yourselves according to your former lusts in the time of your ignorance: but like as he which called you is holy, be ye yourselves also holy in all manner of living' (vv.14,15). Because of the very nature and character of God, obedience and righteousness are twin peaks at which, by the help of the divine Spirit, those who belong to Him in any age, must aim. In Hebrews 8:10. concerning the application of the new covenant to believing Israelites, we read, 'I will put my laws into their mind; and on their heart also will I write them.' One very important purpose of the sacrifice of Christ as a sin-offering was, 'that the requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us. Christ condemned sin in the flesh' (Rom.8:3,4 Margin).

Extensive comparisons could be made between the law of Moses and the instruction of the New Testament for disciples of Christ. A few examples are given: 'Honour thy father and thy mother': 'Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right' (Ex.20:12; Eph.6:1). 'Thou shalt not steal': 'Let him that stole steal no more' (Ex.20:15; Eph.4:28). 'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour': 'But speaking truth in love ...' (Ex.20:16; Eph.4:15). 'Thou shalt not commit adultery': 'Or know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? ... neither fornicators ... nor adulterers ... shall inherit the kingdom of God' (Ex.20:14; 1 Cor.6:9,10).

Now this last quotation, touching the matter of adultery and fornication, is very significant because of its context. The penalty for adultery under Mosaic law was execution by stoning, although divine grace and forgiveness intervened in cases such as David's adultery with Bathsheba. The apostle makes it very plain in writing to the Corinthian Church of God, that a particular offender in the matter of fornication must be excommunicated (1 Cor.5:13). This accords perfectly with the teaching of the later verse in the same passage of 1 Corinthians, quoted above, about loss of inheritance in the kingdom of God. The conclusion is inescapable

that the sinning saint judged by excommunication thereby forfeited his inheritance in the kingdom of God. It is encouraging, and a cause for thanksgiving, that there is clear indication in Paul's subsequent letter that restoration was in view. This matter of loss of inheritance needs to be taken very seriously by those who would claim a place in the kingdom of God for every child of God irrespective of considerations of spiritual condition, and submission to the Lord's will. This matter will be discussed further in a later chapter.

### **Peace and Joy**

If righteousness, as mentioned in Romans 14:17 is a solemn obligation, the other moral characteristics of the kingdom of God are its precious consequences - peace and joy. To this day 'shalom' (peace) is the most characteristic greeting in Israel. In Numbers 25:12 the word of the Lord to the faithful priest Phineas was, 'Behold, I give unto him my covenant of peace'. And in one of those precious passages of comfort and encouragement for His people, God declared through Isaiah, 'my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall my covenant of peace be removed, saith the LORD that hath mercy on thee' (Is.54:10). Similarly, in connection with God's new covenant purposes for a people, nation and kingdom, many scriptures show the emphasis placed on peace as a key characteristic of a priesthood, both holy and royal (1 Pet.2). One such scripture is Ephesians 4:3, 'Giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'. There certainly is a peace directly associated with the believer's union with Christ, a peace which no other relationship in this world can rival.

When Paul had completed his initial exposition of divine justification to the Romans, he wrote, 'Being therefore justified by faith, let us have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom.5:1). The Lord's bequest to His bewildered disciples before Calvary was, 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto

you' (John 14:27). Yet if 'the bond of peace' of which Paul wrote in Ephesians 4 were to be effective in maintaining 'the unity of the Spirit' among disciples in testimony, it would require 'giving diligence'; a real effort by the saints in the Church of God in Ephesus, in the power of the same Holy Spirit. They had been '... built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief corner stone'; and they were '... builded together for a habitation of God in the Spirit' (Eph.2:20,22). In due course it will be seen how these matters relating to the character of the kingdom of God today, as set out in Romans 14, and which are often conditional, correspond closely to the requirements of the constitution laid down in the New Testament for that same kingdom.

Finally, Romans 14:17 speaks of joy which, along with righteousness and peace, finds its source in the Person of the Holy Spirit. In connection with Israel in the Old Testament, as the expression of God's desire for a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex.19:6), joy is often related to the sanctuary and dwelling place of God, which belonged with the priesthood and nation. It was to David that it was given to make extensive preparation for the dwelling place of God. He led the people in generous donation of their valuables for this purpose, and 1 Chronicles 29:9 states, 'Then the people rejoiced, for that they offered willingly, because with a perfect heart they offered willingly to the LORD: and David the king also rejoiced with great joy'. Then, at a time of revival in the reign of Hezekiah, when the solemn services of God's house were restored to a former glory reflecting Solomon's days, the dominant theme was rejoicing: 'So there was great joy in Jerusalem: for since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there was not the like in Jerusalem' (2 Chr.30:26).

Later, when Nehemiah exercised his valiant leadership of the remnant of Israel returning from captivity, the people were sad because the restored service of God's house compared poorly with the glory of previous days.

But Nehemiah had a message for them: ‘... the joy of the LORD is your strength’ (Neh.8:10). This was a joy associated with a divine service once again being given according to the terms of the Book which Ezra had been reading to the attentive congregation from his wooden pulpit, from early morning until mid-day (Neh.8:3-10). Just as there was then a special joy, which was ‘of the Lord’, and which was given to His people in collective obedient service, so today those who seek to give expression to the kingdom of God should find a particular joy in that aspiration, so entering more fully into Romans 14:17.

Acts chapter 8 tells of Philip the evangelist going to Samaria with the good news: ‘... when they believed Philip preaching good tidings concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.’ (Acts 8:12). Little wonder that the overall pronouncement on such a work was, ‘... there was much joy in that city’ (v.8). Jude set out to write to ‘... them that are called’ concerning ‘... our common salvation’. But he was, ‘... constrained to write unto you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints’ (Jude 1,3). ‘The faith’ is the body of New Testament teaching placed on divine record for disciples of Christ to follow till Jesus comes, and embodies the laws of the kingdom of God and the holy nation.

Now, of course, Jude’s short epistle shows that he was particularly concerned about certain moral pitfalls in the way of righteous, collective expression of ‘the faith’. Yet he was also deeply concerned that any such ‘stumbling’ of the saints would interfere with their joy in divine service. So he concludes his short letter with, ‘Now unto him that is able to guard you from stumbling, and to set you before the presence of his glory without blemish in exceeding joy ...’ (v.24). Their strength in kingdom service, as in Nehemiah’s day, must be the ‘joy of the Lord’. The joy of sins forgiven is a sublime satisfaction in itself for the Christian. ‘The joy of the Lord’ in the individual and collective service of the holy nation and king-

dom of God, is a precious additional dimension of joy, offered to subject and obedient disciples, forming the people of God.

### **Character Failure**

In stressing the high importance of obedience and righteousness in the character of the kingdom of God and the holy nation, it is clear that a time may sadly come when an individual disqualifies himself from a place in it. Reference was made to 1 Corinthians 6:9,10, and the same solemn stricture on moral sin is contained in Ephesians 5:5. Here the apostle is offering solemn warning about sins which might readily affect the disciples in the church, and declares, 'For this ye know of a surety, that no fornicator, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, which is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God'. Furthermore, not only moral sins, as described here, may deprive a person of an inheritance in the kingdom of God. Paul issues a solemn charge to the Thessalonians to '... withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which they received of us' (2 Thess.3:6).

Also to Titus he writes, 'A man that is heretical after a first and second admonition refuse; knowing that such a one is perverted, and sinneth, being self-condemned' (Tit.3:10,11). Thus serious disorder in a disciple's general life; or the support or teaching of seriously wrong doctrine, also call for discipline and separation.

### **Israel's Fall**

Now it is clear from the gospels, and especially from the Lord's own words there, that Israel nationally had become disqualified as the repository of the kingdom. Underlying this was their disobedience to the law of God which had constituted the nation as holy and priestly at Sinai. Their disobedience, clothed reprehensibly in hypocrisy, led to fruitlessness, and finally to the rejection of the King Himself among them. All of this is graphically portrayed by the Lord Himself in Matthew 21:33-46,



in the parable of the householder who planted a vineyard, sending His servants, and finally His Son, to gather the fruit. When the Lord related the husbandman's words, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and take his inheritance' (v.38), Israel's fate was sealed nationally. Moreover, the chief priests and the Pharisees '... perceived that he spake of them' (v.45). For the Lord had drawn the devastating and inescapable conclusion from His parable, 'Therefore say I unto you, the kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof' (v.43).

This is the holy nation of which Peter wrote in his first epistle. Psalm 118 is, significantly, taken up and quoted in both passages with regard to 'the stone which the builders rejected'. Rejected by the leaders of Israel, the Living Stone, the Lord Jesus Christ, is presented by Peter as the One, to whom coming, believers who are themselves also living stones, are '... built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood ... a royal priesthood, a holy nation' (1 Pet.2:4,5,9).

### **Israel's King Refused**

'Now after that John was delivered up, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe in the gospel' (Mark 1:14,15). Thus Mark announces the opening of the earthly ministry of the One '... born King of the Jews' (Matt.2:2). Clearly the Lord Jesus invited the '... lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matt.10:6) to recognise their Messiah and King. Equally clearly, He understood very well that He was about to be rejected by Israel, and the very first action which Mark records after the above words were spoken was the calling of the first of the twelve apostles at the sea of Galilee. The Master knew that He was starting something new with these men.

Against this background, it is futile to speculate about any possible turn which events might have taken had Israel nationally received and wel-

comed their rightful King. The nation rejected Him, and the recitation of the words of Psalm 118, 'Blessed is he (the King) that cometh in the name of the Lord' (Matt.21:9), by the praising multitude, had a plaintive ring, as Zechariah 9:9 had its promised fulfilment 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy king cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, even upon a colt the foal of an ass' (Zech. 9:9; Matt.21:5; John 12:15). Sadly, however, we read, 'And when he drew nigh, he saw the city and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known in this day, even thou, the things which belong unto peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes ... because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation' (Luke 19:41,42,44).

Consider, too, the distress of the beloved apostle Paul, 'Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee' (Phil.3:5), as he writes to the Romans in 10:16-11:32 of a '... disobedient and gainsaying people' (10:21): of the wild olive grafted in to '... become partaker with them of the root of the fatness of the olive tree' (11:17); and of the coming day when '... the fulness of the Gentiles be come in; and so all Israel shall be saved' (11:25,26).

'O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgements, and his ways past tracing out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and unto him, are all things. To him be the glory for ever. Amen' (Rom.11:33-36).

### **Transfer of the Kingdom**

Returning now to Matthew 21, the husbandmen are seen to cast the Son out of the vineyard, and kill Him. Their judgement is pronounced; and the Lord declares, 'The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof' (21:43).

These words were spoken to the chief priests and Pharisees who perceived the indictment directed at them. It is necessary, however, to lay alongside these words those which the Lord spoke in a similar vein about the kingdom of God, to His own disciples and contained in Luke 12.

In this passage the Master is looking forward to the witness and testimony of the disciples in a new dispensation of divine purposes. He warned them of persecution, and assured them that the Holy Spirit who would be with them and in them, would teach them ‘... in that very hour what ye ought to say’ (12:12). And so on ... ‘Be not anxious for your life, what ye shall eat; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on ... for all these things do the nations of the world seek after’ (12:22,30). A holy nation was now in His view, not greatly concerned with material things, but one oriented towards spiritual things. So, ‘... seek ye his kingdom, and these things shall be added unto you. Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom’ (12:31,32).

### **The Little Flock**

The implications of the term ‘flock’ require careful consideration. The Lord’s words to the Jews are given in John 10:26-28, ‘... ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish.’ Eternal life is a personal gift to each one who believes. Yet the Lord also said of the sheep for whom He laid down His life, ‘... they shall become one flock, one shepherd’ (John 10:16). A flock describes sheep, gathered in collective subjection and obedience to the one Shepherd. It was the Father’s good pleasure to give them the kingdom. The flock of Luke 12 and the nation of Matthew 21 come together clearly as different descriptions of those to whom, collectively, it was the Lord’s purpose now to give the kingdom. This was the kingdom taken away from Israel, to be committed to the little flock of the disciples of the Lord Jesus. Eternal life is given to individual believers, and no-one can ever lose

this priceless gift. The kingdom of God is a collective endowment, whose privileges can, as has already been shown, be forfeited.

Praise God for ‘... the God of peace, who brought again from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep with the blood of the eternal covenant, even our Lord Jesus.’ One purpose of that demonstration of divine power was to ‘... make you perfect in every good thing to do his will, working in us that which is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen’ (Heb.13:20,21). These words almost close the New Testament epistle which expounds so precious and uniquely the sanctuary service of the people of God today, the holy priesthood. So the Great Shepherd in resurrection brings together the sheep He had initially designated as ‘little flock’ to teach them more about the kingdom to be given to them, ‘... appearing unto them by the space of forty days, and speaking the things concerning the kingdom of God’ (Acts 1:3). These things were to become incorporated in ‘the apostles’ teaching’.

The Lord was teaching His men about the kingdom, its character, constitution, service, and much more. Having looked a little at the character of the kingdom He was about to establish among a subject people and nation, it is necessary now to consider its constitution.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONSTITUTION

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By 'constitution' here is meant the established basis for the organisation and conduct of any body of people, including the terms of association with it. The Lord in resurrection had many things to say to the disciples whom He had first addressed as 'little flock'. There was much pastoral guidance needed if the concepts and principles of the kingdom of God were to be adequately expressed. So the Master clearly devoted much time in the 40 days of Acts 1:3 to instruction, '... speaking the things concerning the kingdom of God'.

Not at all unnaturally, one question was uppermost in their minds, 'Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' (1:6). The Lord's reply - 'It is not for you to know times or seasons, which the Father hath set within his own authority.' (v.7) - was not completely negative on the point they raised. Rather, He immediately focused their thoughts on the task directly in hand in the promised power of the coming Holy Spirit, namely their spreading witness, ultimately '... unto the uttermost part of the earth' (v.8).

It was in His purpose to reveal later to Paul, in another context, that Israel was being set aside for a period. Only at the end of 'the times of the Gentiles' would Israel come again into its own in God's plans (Rom.11:25-28). Furthermore, He had in view the teaching which Peter and Paul would be caused to place on record about the gathering, government and service of the 'nation bringing forth the fruits', 'the little flock'. Doubtless the principles which undergirded the witness and service of the '... people for God's own possession' (1 Pet.2:9) were central in the instruction of the 40 days of Acts 1:3, though many details remained to be revealed in subsequent apostolic teaching. The apostles acted without hesitation immediately after Pentecost in steering the new

converts, mainly Jews initially, into the pattern described in Acts 2:41,42 - 'They then that received his word were baptized: and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and prayers.' This brought into existence the Church of God in Jerusalem.

### **The Nature of the Kingdom**

Nor is it at all surprising that the apostles should have acted decisively in establishing the basic steps by which disciples were constituted as a church of God. For the discourses which are indicated in Acts 1:3 were clearly not the first time His men had heard their Master speak of circumstances which would prevail after His death and resurrection, and the pattern of church service which they would establish under new covenant law. Matthew 18:15-20 refers to the Lord discussing with the disciples a situation where a brother who is sinned against should first approach the offender, if necessary with two witnesses. If this were to prove unsuccessful in resolving the difficulty, the matter was to be related to 'the church', or 'the congregation'.

This surely looked forward to New Testament churches of God in which just such occasions of difficulty would sadly, but inevitably, arise. Indeed, advice given in the epistles provides a close parallel to the Lord's own words (see 2 Thess.3:15; Tit.3:10; James 5:19). Then again, in the days immediately following His resurrection, the Lord Jesus met His disciples in the mountain in Galilee. Having assured them of His universal authority, He commissioned them in comprehensive terms about His purpose for this dispensation: 'Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world'

(Mat. 28:19, 20). On this strong, explicit foundation, it is suggested, He built His subsequent 40 days' instruction.

It has already been remarked that it is not surprising that the apostles wondered whether this new expression of the kingdom of God was to be applied solely to the Jewish converts. Gradually the contrary would be revealed to them as the apostles reacted to the Jewish rejection of the gospel, and the apostles' doctrine. Special insights were presented to Peter in the matter of Cornelius (Acts 10); and the great apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, was thrust into the work of establishing the new phase of the kingdom of God among a new holy nation. Surely, many of the '... all things whatsoever I commanded you' of Matthew 28:20 were things such as are indicated in Matthew 18 about 'the church (or congregation)', and doubtless amplified and expounded at length during the 40 days of Acts 1. In short, these men knew the basics of what was expected of them, from the very beginning of the new dispensation.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CHURCH AND CHURCHES

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**A**t this point it is important to state clearly that the glorious matter of the Church, the Body of Christ which came into being at Pentecost, is in no way being lost sight of. Indeed, the Holy Spirit endowment of each believer was paramount; and, in one of his great passages of doctrinal instruction, Paul makes it clear beyond all doubt that, ‘... in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body’ (1 Cor.12:13). In writing to the Ephesian church he presents the same truth in terms of believers being ‘... sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise’; and extends his powerful discourse about ‘... the mystery of Christ; which in other generations was not made known unto the sons of men, as it hath now been revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit’ (Eph.1:13; 3:4,5).

Incomparable and grand as this truth is, a particular objective of this booklet is to explore the truth of the kingdom of God in the New Testament, and it will repeatedly be apparent that this is not perceived as co-terminous with the Church the Body of Christ. At the same time, it is beyond dispute that the Master’s purpose was for all members of His Body on earth to be identified with the expression of the kingdom of God which He expounded to His disciples for this dispensation. It was to ‘the teacher of Israel’, Nicodemus, that the Lord declared, ‘Except a man be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God’; and again, ‘Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God’ (John 3:3,5). New birth should lead to the vision and experience of the kingdom.

In no way can Matthew 28:18-20 be construed as envisaging disciples of Christ who were not baptized into the triune Name, or who did not set themselves to be subject to ‘whatsoever I have commanded you,’



whether the command came directly from His own lips, or from subsequent Scripture, inspired by the Holy Spirit whom He sent. Are all believers there today? How many have passed through the waters of baptism and addressed the issue comprehensively of learning and observing ‘whatsoever I have commanded you’?

### **God as King**

Consideration has already been given to the advent of the Lord Jesus preaching the kingdom of God. There was no doubt about the identity of the King whose kingdom He preached. This was a monarchy vested alone in God Himself, and now God incarnate was proclaiming His kingdom. So at Sinai when, conditional on obedience and covenant observance, Israel became a ‘kingdom of priests, and a holy nation’, the Lord Himself was to be the supreme Ruler in His kingdom. Some 500 years later, a very sad movement arose in that holy nation, in which God, as King, had wished to take so much pleasure.

‘Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah: and they said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations. But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the LORD. And the LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not be king over them’ (1 Sam.8:4-7). The chequered history of the kings of Israel and Judah thereafter is faithfully, if sadly, chronicled in Scripture. In amazing grace, God raised up David, after Saul’s signal failure, and established his dynasty as a golden thread running through all His future purposes of grace; leading indeed to the promised Messiah Himself, and following through in eternal purposes in what Scripture calls ‘... the sure mercies of David’ (Is.55:3; Acts 13:34).

What a marvel of divine grace all of this was, especially since its origin was an act of unfaithfulness on the part of God's old covenant people. That God should have woven the human kingship of His people into His eternal purposes in Christ, is a cause for worship and gratitude. That David's glorious heir to the throne of Israel, Solomon, should have been the product of the union with Bathsheba, which had initially so grievously displeased God, compounds the wonder of His grace, depicting as Solomon did, the millennial glories of God's King enthroned in the holy hill of Zion.

### **A Failed Monarchy**

At the end of the seventy years of Israel's captivity in Babylon, the Spirit-revived remnant returned to Jerusalem and Judah to rebuild the house of God and restore its service according to the covenant of the Lord in the law given to Moses. They had no king and no-one who could ascend the throne. But that they functioned as God's kingdom, subject to His rule and authority, is clear from the records of events given by Ezra and Nehemiah, and in the prophecies of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

The renewed service of the house of God was a cardinal expression of the principles of the kingdom. Thus, although it was not necessary that a human king should be on the throne, constitutional arrangements were necessary to re-establish the rule of God among His people. To this end the Lord commanded the leaders of the remnant to identify responsible men to teach and administer His law. They were accountable to the throne of God, and it is interesting and instructive to note that, as well as exercising local responsibilities, provision was made for such men to deal with problems which were too difficult for local solution. There was provision for referral to those who had wider knowledge and experience.

Thus God's rule would be righteously and effectively administered. These principles applied even before there was a human king on the throne of Israel (see Deut.1:12-18; 16:18-20; 17:1-13). They were also in evi-

dence in the return of the remnant in the persons of the ‘... princes of the people’, ‘... the chiefs of the province’, and ‘... chiefs of fathers’ houses’ (Neh.11:1,3,13).

### **Unity of Nation and Kingdom**

It is very important to observe these principles at work in the ordering of the kingdom of God in old covenant times. While the expression of the kingdom varies from period to period of divine purposes, the basic principles remain. God sees the people and nation to which He commits the kingdom as a unity, and provides the instruction and institutions whereby that unity can be maintained. This has been noted in relation to Israel’s pre-monarchy days, and also when the remnant returned from Babylon. The division of the kingdom after Solomon is revealed in Scripture as unrelieved tragedy. The calves set up in Dan and Bethel only underlined the serious departure from God’s unified purpose for the worship of His Name in His house at Jerusalem. Those who were called ‘the rulers of the Jews’ in the days of Christ’s earthly ministry, were clearly held responsible by Him for the ordering (or, sadly, the disordering) of the divine service of God’s people, nation and kingdom at that time. He charged them with not only the guilt of neglect and hypocrisy, but ultimately with rebellion against their rightful King. This recalls the pronouncement in Matthew 21 that the kingdom was about to be taken away from them. The close link between the house of God and the kingdom of God is reinforced in the parallel declaration, ‘... your house is left unto you desolate’ (Matt.23:38).

### **So Today**

It is, therefore, entirely to be expected that the Lord would direct the thoughts of His apostles in establishing the institutions essential for the unity of a holy nation in this dispensation of grace; a holy nation to which He was committing the new expression of His kingdom. It is apparent that the apostles were very concerned to see the same principles

at work in all of the churches of the saints. This meant that a high degree of unity must also be seen in their practices and the ordering of their services. The point is well illustrated in 1 Corinthians 11 where Paul is giving instruction about the service and worship of the church when gathered together for these purposes. He gives instruction about the covering of the head by women when 'praying or prophesying' and concludes, 'But if any man seemeth to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God' (v.16).

Similarly, in chapter 7 of the same epistle, in writing about relationships between men and women, he says, 'And so ordain I in all the churches' (v.17). The people of God, aspiring to divine service, were grouped in churches of God, where that service expressed the functions of a holy and royal priesthood in the spiritual house. This priesthood is intimately linked to the kingdom of God, as beautifully set out in Revelation 1:5,6 '... from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth ... and he made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto his God and Father; to him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen.' So the indivisible character of the kingdom, the house and priesthood is demonstrated, and their unity in God's purpose emerges plainly.

### **'That they may be one'**

John 17 contains the Lord's high priestly prayer to His Father before Calvary. That prayer was for '... those whom thou hast given me' (v.9). They were His; His prayer was not for what had already been established by the Father's gift. It was for their sanctification, and that of '... them also that believe on me through their word' (v.20). So the Lord earnestly asked, 'That they may all be one ... that they may be perfected into one; that the world may know that thou didst send me, and lovedst them, even as thou lovedst me' (vv.21,23). The Lord clearly had in view a people whose sanctification and service would reflect not only the unassail-

able unity of the Church the Body of Christ, but would also project a visible unity which would offer to the world a witness concerning the One sent by the Father, and the continuation of His work in this world. This surely was the witness and service of the 'little flock', of 'the nation bringing forth the fruits thereof', to whom the Lord was committing the kingdom of God.

It is important in discussing the constitution of the kingdom of God today, to see clearly how central is this issue of visible and manifest unity. Through the oral and written ministry of the apostles, this was achieved to a considerable extent. It was then, and always will be, not without flaws. Human nature asserted itself and corrections had to be made by the apostles, and sometimes rebukes administered, as seen in the Corinthian epistles. The principle remains, however, and in the next chapter a little will be said about rule and government in the kingdom of God. The role of elders and the elderhood is central in the constitutional arrangements ordained by the apostles in the New Testament.

## **1 Peter 2**

Reference has already been made to this important passage of New Testament teaching when the prior requirement of holiness, underlined in chapter 1 was noted. This is further emphasised in the opening verses of chapter 2, 'Putting away therefore all wickedness, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, as newborn babes, long for the spiritual milk which is without guile, that ye may grow thereby unto salvation'. Peter was writing to disciples of Christ in churches of God, many of whom were converted Jews. He addressed them as '... living stones ... built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (v.5). Subsequently, after discussing Christ as the 'chief cornerstone' (v.6), quoting Isaiah 28:16; as 'The stone which the builders rejected' (v.7), quoting Psalm 118:22; and as 'a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence', quot-

ing Isaiah 8:14, the apostle extends his description of the living stones who were built up. He says, ‘... ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that ye may shew forth the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: which in time past were no people, but now are the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy’ (vv.9,10).

Having already seen the intimate closeness of the priesthood, the house, and the kingdom, this passage must surely be regarded as central to the constitution of the kingdom of God. The building up of the living stones produced a spiritual house, a priesthood both holy and royal, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession. Does this embrace all believers in Christ, all born again individuals, all members of the Church which is His Body? The answer is ‘No’ for several reasons, some of which have already been touched on, including the convergence of the truths of house, kingdom, priesthood and nation, and the conditional nature of service in these. The matter of obedience has been seen to run through the truth of the kingdom from the earliest days of God’s dealing with His old covenant people, indeed with Abraham. Of the house of God, the writer of Hebrews declares, ‘... whose house are we, if we hold fast our boldness ...’ (Heb.3:6). Holding fast is clearly called for.

A similar warning is issued by Paul in Romans chapter 11 concerning the unbelief of Israel, and the grafting in to God’s purposes of Gentile believers. ‘... by their unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by thy faith. Be not highminded but fear: for if God spared not the natural branches, neither will he spare thee’ (Rom 11:20,21). The stones which are built up, as described by Peter, are living with the life of Christ. The building which results cannot correspond with the building of which the Lord spoke when He said, ‘I will build my church’ (Matt.16:18), for the house of 1 Peter 2:5, besides being vulnerable to human disobedience, is a place requiring correct behaviour (1 Tim.3:15); the place where judge-

ment begins (1 Pet.4:17), and corresponds to the temple of God which men may corrupt and destroy (1 Cor.3:16,17).

### House and Temple

At this point it is necessary to re-iterate that it was always God's ideal that all members of the Body of Christ on earth should find a place in God's house; should share in the inheritance of the kingdom of God and the holy nation. The great commission of Matthew 28:18-20 was sweeping in its scope for the work of the apostles and their successors. The priesthood of 1 Peter 2, holy and royal, is one in which all believers should serve. But do they? The expression is often used, 'the priesthood of all believers'. Priestly service was certainly in God's purpose as a heritage for all the children of God, as stated above in relation to house and kingdom. However, in New Testament church teaching, the priesthood and the house embrace the same persons. The two belonged together in the Old Testament; the people of the house of Israel, and the physical tabernacle or temple. Today they are one as 1 Peter 2:5 shows plainly.

What is built up (of living stones) is a dwelling place for God where He can, and should, be worshipped in the offering up of spiritual sacrifices. Every born again person is an integral part of the Body of Christ, in whatever isolated or remote part of the earth he may be, whether associated with other believers in Christian service, or as often, inappropriately linked with unbelievers in some 'church' organisation. This cannot be seen as the dwelling place of God among His people collectively. But a dwelling place, a place of divine service, can be, and is, seen in New Testament churches of God, comprising '... a holy temple in the Lord', and '... a habitation of God in the Spirit' (Eph.2:21,22). This construction of Ephesians 2 does not depend on the RV translation, 'each several building', although several authorities, including Westcott, support this. The commoner translation, 'all the building', equally refers to a 'temple' and a 'habitation'.

Now, 1 Corinthians 3:16,17 deals with the Church God in Corinth as '... a temple (or sanctuary) of God', and explicitly states, 'If any man destroyeth the temple of God ...' the habitation, house, temple, sanctuary of God - the very heart of the kingdom of God and the holy nation - is destructible, something which is definitely not true of the Church, the Body of Christ, although the Church of God in Corinth had the character of the Body, and the saints were, individually, members of the Body (1 Cor.12:27). It is essential that this clear position be laid down, or the common confusion in church teaching relating to the Body of Christ, and to the house of God, will continue.

### **The Constitution in Action**

Before, however, leaving the particular matter of the constitution of the kingdom of God, it is helpful to look briefly at a passage in the Acts of the Apostles which provides a useful illustration of some of the points made above. Paul was on his first missionary journey and had been working in Galatia. He was stoned at Lystra but his life was spared by God for further service at Derbe. He and Barnabas returned in pastoral concern to the place of his stoning, Lystra, and to Iconium and Antioch, 'Confirming the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed for them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they had believed' (Acts 14:22,23). There are three important features here of the establishment and continuing service of churches of God.

Firstly, they exhorted them '... to continue in the faith' (v.22). In chapter 3 reference was made to Jude v.3 and the exhortation '... to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints'; and it was submitted that 'the faith' represents the body of New Testament doctrine committed to God's people as their statutory guidance for



divine service, the instrument by which God's gathered people are to be governed.

Secondly, the disciples were exhorted '... that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22). This entrance is clearly not by the new birth, although the latter is stated in John 3:3,5 to be a first requirement; rather it is through tribulations which are associated with obedience to the faith, '... the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ' (James 2:1).

Thirdly, the apostles '... appointed for them elders in every church' (Acts 14:23). The elders, as will be seen presently, are those responsible to rule, being themselves under the rule of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:7,17). So the ministry of Paul and Barnabas in Asia Minor reveals some of the essential elements of the kingdom of God for this present age, as exemplified in the Galatian churches.

Similarly in Ephesus, Paul spent three months '... persuading as to the things concerning the kingdom of God' (Acts 19:8). He separated the disciples from those who were disobedient, '... speaking evil of the Way' (v.9), itself an interesting term describing the movement which Paul was establishing in that city, expressing kingdom truth and service. Later, when Paul met the Ephesian elders by appointment at Miletus, as recounted in Acts 20:17-38, his ministry of exhortation to them was very comprehensive concerning God's purpose in His serving people. First, he referred to '... the gospel of the grace of God' (v.24); then, to his preaching of '... the kingdom' (v.25); then, to his fearless declaration of '... the whole counsel of God' (v.27).

The first of these expressed God's universal message of salvation and grace. The 'kingdom of God' reminded them of God's rule and authority among His people, gathered in the churches of God which Paul had done so much to found and establish. And 'the whole counsel of God' could

not be more comprehensive of all God's revelation of His eternal purposes, then centred in His holy nation.

A kingdom requires a constitution to establish the laws by which are determined the rights, privileges, and the responsibilities of those who form the kingdom. In the case of the nation of Israel, the constitution of the kingdom was embodied in the law given through Moses. By this instrument God rules His people, defining their responsibilities to the Lord Himself, to one another, and to the nations around them. Today it is '... the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ' (James 2:1) which answers to the Mosaic law; the teaching of the new covenant apostles and prophets, preserved in the New Testament Scriptures. 'The faith' covers every area of Christian life and activity. It reveals the privileges of God's kingdom today, and the responsibilities which are linked to these privileges. It is God's doctrine for His people, His holy nation, His kingdom on earth.

## CHAPTER SIX: GOVERNMENT, LAW, AND ORDER

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It has already been shown that rule and authority are vital to the kingdom of God in any age. The rule is the rule of God, and the authority that which He exerts directly, or through delegation to men whom He has fitted for the purpose. The Old Testament Scriptures show that the will of God is supreme, even when He granted authority to men, accepting with sorrow the call of Israel for a king ‘like the nations’, and committing extensive powers over His people to a succession of monarchs, some good, most bad. In this area of government, the concepts of the kingdom and the nation converge closely. Any national government has two main spheres of responsibility. One concerns internal or ‘home affairs’, the other, relationships with other nations or groupings of people around them, ‘foreign relations’. All nations have these divisions of government in one form or another. God’s holy nation is no exception.

### **Home Affairs**

In the case of Israel, the nation is seen camped in the wilderness, each tribe having a position assigned to it by God, and every man in his divinely chosen place (Num.1:52). It was under the guidance of the Spirit of God that Balaam described the vista before him, ‘How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy tabernacles, O Israel! As valleys are they spread forth, as gardens by the river side, as lign-aloes which the LORD hath planted, as cedar trees beside the waters’ (Num.24:5,6). Such a beautiful picture of God dwelling among a happy, united, and well-ordered people must surely be His desire and purpose for all ages, and one which will find a glorious climax in the future as revealed in Revelation 21:3, ‘And I heard a great voice out of the throne saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is

with men, and He shall dwell with them, and they shall be His peoples, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God'.

Even before the tabernacle was erected in the wilderness, and God took up His dwelling there, He issued statutes and judgements which covered every aspect of Israel's national life. These included not only the laws of divine service for the 'kingdom of priests', but also a range of domestic and family matters, military service, even questions of hygiene. Down through the centuries many acknowledgments have been made of the excellence of the Mosaic law; so much so that it has been widely copied and used as a model by many governments.

### **Elders in Israel**

The arrangements which were put in place from the earliest days of Israel's history are hinted at in Scripture, if not described in great detail. In Exodus 3:16 Moses was instructed to gather '... the elders of Israel' to appraise them of the commission he had received from God as their deliverer. This was while the people were still in slavery in Egypt, and there clearly was some measure of divine recognition of the role of these men who doubtless represented tribes and families. This recognition continued after the exodus and the system was progressively developed, notably when Moses was wisely advised by Jethro his father-in-law to unburden himself of excessive administration by delegation and management reorganisation (Deut.1:15). The wise men chosen from the tribes became what we would call magistrates and administrators.

Upon the seventy elders who, with Moses, were to '... bear the burden of the people' (Num.11:17), the Lord put the same spirit that rested on Moses, rather as Elisha inherited a double portion of the spirit of Elijah. So various levels of responsibility were established for the orderly government of the people of God, and in one form or another this obviously continued in the days of the judges and the kings, even in captivity, and certainly in the remnant restoration recorded by Ezra and Nehemiah (1

Chr.11:3; 2 Sam.17:4; 1 Kin.8:1-3; Ezek.14:1; 20:1,3; Ezra 5:9; 6:14). So in the days of the Lord Jesus' earthly ministry the elders, chief priests and scribes feature with prominence if not much credit, and the Sanhedrin presided over the condemnation and murder of their Messiah.

### **The Elderhood**

The central human instrument of government today in the holy nation, in the kingdom of God in this period of His purposes, is the elderhood. The doctrinal position of the churches of God in the Fellowship of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, is bound up with the matter of the elderhood. Sadly, controversy has continued about this among the various elements of the Brethren movement which rightly discarded the unscriptural notions of ordained clergy which was adopted by national churches and other denominations. Amongst the important doctrinal statements on positional and other truths in the churches of God, is 'Elders and the Elderhood'. This is a booklet setting out in some detail our understanding of the New Testament on this very important matter. Here only certain cardinal points and events in the experience of the New Testament churches will be touched on, to indicate the pattern of divine rule in the kingdom of God today.

Reference to the office and appointment of elders can be found in many places, e.g. Acts 14:22,23 where Paul and his fellow workers appointed elders in every city of Galatia in which churches of God had been established. Acts 20:17 tells of Paul calling to him for consultation the elders of the church in Ephesus. In 1 Timothy 3:1-17 and Titus 1:5-9 there is guidance on the recognition of elders; and in 1 Peter 5:1,2 Peter speaks tenderly to his fellow elders. The words elder, overseer, and bishop are used interchangeably in the New Testament. Their work was to 'Tend the flock of God' (1 Pet.5:2), and to have rule over the saints, in which role they were to be remembered, obeyed and saluted (Heb.13:7,17,24).

Deacons also were appointed for the service of the churches (Phil.1:1), and their character profile is no less demanding than that of overseers, as indicated in 1 Timothy 3. Very early in the history of the New Testament churches it was considered necessary to appoint a group of distinguished brethren to administer ‘... the daily ministration’ (Acts 6:1) of necessary resources to certain neglected widows. So the government and administration of the kingdom of God was established, ranging from the most mundane matters to the vital issues of pastoral spiritual care and the teaching of the sound doctrine of the Lord.

### **Internal Government Today**

Throughout history nations and kingdoms have faced threats to their national integrity and even survival. In such circumstances it has become a maxim that ‘unity is strength.’ The history of Israel as God’s old covenant people certainly bears this out. Their national vulnerability was evident when the kingdom split after Solomon’s death, and the seeds of the subsequent captivities were sown. In the principles God applied to the matter of rule in Israel, human responsibility was a central factor in the integrated government of the nation. Whether applied centrally, or in local situations, weakness of government administration, as in the days of the judges, readily deteriorated until ‘... every man did that which was right in his own eyes’ (Judg.21:25).

The evidence in the New Testament for the unity of the elderhood of the churches of God will be considered briefly. First, it is useful to ask whether it would be consistent with the divine principles of government seen earlier in action in God’s kingdom, if elders in churches of God today were completely autonomous and independent in the maintenance of sound doctrine and practice, as is the case with certain groups of believers. Of course, it is true that the canon of Holy Scripture is now complete, and this alone is the guide book, sufficient to meet all the Christian’s needs in perceiving divine truth. It is also true that the Holy Spir-

it has been given to ‘... guide you into all the truth’ (John 16:13). Yet in the experience of the early churches, and of the apostles and elders, they found it necessary to confer more widely than the local church in determining just how the guidance received from the Old Testament Scriptures, and the Lord’s 40 days of instruction, should properly be applied to problems they were facing. Similarly, the anointing they, and we, have received of the Holy Spirit, actually led them to His mind on vital matters of doctrine by way of the same sound approach, namely prayerful consultation and conferring together.

### **The Jerusalem Council**

This refers, of course, particularly to what has been called the Jerusalem council of Acts 15. Reference has already been made to the publication of the Churches of God entitled ‘Elders and the Elderhood’, where a range of scriptural examples is given of activities in the early churches which substantiate the claim that the elderhood of the holy nation then was united, striving earnestly for unity of doctrine and practice in all the churches. Not all of these references will be followed here, but it is important to underline the continuing relevance of the Jerusalem council. This has been regarded by some commentators as a ‘one off’ occasion on which it seemed convenient and wise to those involved to confer. It has been suggested that such circumstances may arise at any time between two assemblies, as happened at Antioch and Jerusalem, when a problem of doctrine arises. Another, but contrasting, point of view claims that the issue in Acts 15 was so monumental in the understanding of God’s purposes at that time (namely, the question of the application of elements of Mosaic law to new dispensation Christians) that its processes of resolution should not necessarily be adopted as an example for disciples throughout the dispensation, faced with problems of lesser importance.

Now it is certainly true that the decisions reached by the Holy Spirit’s guidance, as recorded in Acts 15, represented a real watershed in under-

standing some of the things concerning the kingdom of God today. This was achieved, not by a direct word of apostolic authority, but by the conferring of brethren in prayerful subjection to the Holy Spirit's guidance. The decisions of Acts 15, let it also be carefully noted, were promulgated to all the churches as '... decrees for to keep' (Acts 16:4). Should the elderhood of the churches of God today look away from such an example, insisting on the complete autonomy of each church or assembly of the Lord's people? For this would lead to the inevitable consequence of progressive fragmentation of assemblies as fundamental issues arise to divide them, so that one will not have fellowship or dealings with another. This is the point reached today by the Brethren movement, a movement which did so much in the 19th century to draw believers back to a New Testament pattern of divine service.

### **An Example**

An example can be cited of a point of Christian doctrine. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul is giving instruction about men and women in their respective roles in the service of the church. He teaches that the women should be 'veiled', having their heads covered. Although one modern version of the Bible, the NIV, gives a marginal comment on the text suggesting that the woman's hair is itself the required head covering, neither the text itself, nor the straightforward reading of the passage can justify such a conclusion. Others say that Paul was legislating for a time when the relevance of head covering for women was different from that of today. But, in fact, the apostle links the matter closely to what must be an abiding principle, the issue of subjection, commencing in the Godhead, and extending to human relations. Surely this principle does not change with time. Yet we find today that one assembly of Christians yields to popular pressure for women's heads to be uncovered in the services of the church, and another separates from it to adhere to the Word of the Lord.



The result is the disruption and division of those whom the Lord desires to form His holy nation and kingdom. The leadership of a united elderhood in churches of God today, earnestly submitting itself to the Holy Spirit in the Word of God and in mutual subjection to one another, can and does bring about unity in such an important matter. Lest it be alleged that in saying these things we are living in a world of fantasy which fails to take account of human nature and the differences which arise between and among strong men, the following pertinent quotation from 'Elders and the Elderhood' (p.26) is offered:

'It cannot be assumed that the discussions among the apostles and elders on important subjects were always harmonious and led easily to decisions. Indeed, Galatians 2:1-15, Acts 11:1-18 and 15:39, would seem to indicate otherwise, and that in effect straight talking took place. Agreement was only reached after deep thought and much prayer, and a willingness to submit to one another. These were chief men, strong in personality, deeply convicted as to their calling, custodians often of direct personal revelations from their risen Lord. How marvellous it was that they were willing even to countenance the need to discuss together their mutual problems and to integrate their teachings into the pattern of sound words which would be taught to all the churches.'

### **Domestic Issues**

A little space has been devoted to the vital issue of unity in church government, and thus to the ordering of the holy nation and kingdom of God which the churches of God represent in the New Testament. Other matters which help complete the picture of the internal regulation of a spiritual people require brief comment. The relationships of husbands and wives, children and parents, servants and masters are dealt with in several of the epistles - see Ephesians 5:22-6:9; Colossians 3:18-4:1; 1 Peter 3:1-12. Then again, in his first epistle to Timothy, Paul offers strong guidance on the correct attitude to elders, widows, and others. For exam-

ple, 'Rebuke not an elder, but exhort him as a father' (5:1); and, 'Against an elder receive not an accusation, except at the mouth of two or three witnesses' (5:19). Such 'judicial' guidance contributes materially to the proper ordering of God's kingdom.

### **'Foreign Policy'**

It was observed earlier that, as well as the regulation of 'home affairs', any nation must also have a 'foreign policy'. Israel failed signally in this aspect of their national life, neglecting God's warnings about separation from the nations around, and repeatedly allowing spiritual contamination through fraternising with heathen nations. Solomon's marital liaisons provide one example. His heart was drawn away from God and the worship of His sanctuary, and the nation inevitably suffered in consequence. God's holy nation today must also be separated from the world and its priorities and preoccupations. 'Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any many love the world, the love of the Father is not in him' (1 John 2:15).

The adversary is both subtle and persistent in insinuating the world and its ways into the lives and hearts of the subjects of God's kingdom. The clear warning of the Old Testament word serves admirably today, 'Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life' (Prov.4:23). It was a solemn moment when the Lord declared to Pilate, 'My kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36). Today those favoured with a place in His kingdom must evaluate very carefully their relationship to the world and its politics, including such sensitive matters as military service.

### **Defence of Truth**

Another aspect of separation is also vital for the holy nation, namely separation from the teaching and practice of wrong doctrine. Reference has been made above, by way of example, to the required evidence of the subjection of women in church gatherings. Such matters were surely very

much on Paul's mind when he wrote in such impassioned terms to Timothy. He was concerned, not only for the essentials of the doctrine of the person and redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ, but he also wrote, 'Hold the pattern of sound words which thou hast heard from me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed unto thee guard through the Holy Spirit which dwelleth in us (2 Tim.1:13,14 Margin). 'The pattern' that Timothy had learned from Paul and which he had assisted the apostle in establishing among the churches of God was one which encompassed every aspect of the kingdom of God committed to the holy nation. Just as Moses was commanded to make all things about God's house '... after their pattern, which hath been shewed thee in the mount' (Ex.25:40), so today the pattern for God's people is laid down in 'the faith' (Jude v.3), and must, as required, be contended for to the extent of separation from those who reject that pattern. This separation is a matter of no pleasure for the churches of God today, often indeed of sorrow, but presents no less of a challenge than that presented to Israel in the past.

### **Spiritual and Secular**

Finally, on the general matter of government in the kingdom of God, attention is called to the attitude commanded by apostolic teaching toward the government of the secular society in which God's people live their daily lives. This matter is summed up, notably in Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1,2; and 1 Peter 2:13-17. The principles laid down for those in God's kingdom recognise that, '... the powers that be are ordained of God' (Rom.13:1). They follow closely the Master's basic rule, 'Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's' (Matt.22:21). Yet that is not to suggest for a moment that the faithful application of this teaching will always be straightforward. Many and grievous have been the dilemmas faced by faithful disciples of Christ down the centuries in seeking to express their loyalty to Him in the face of the most intensely complex challenges by wicked

men with power, whether Caesar, Nero, Hitler, Stalin, or others. Those who have been spared such decisions do well to lift up their sorely tried brothers and sisters in the arms of prayer.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: WITNESS, SERVICE, AND CONFLICT

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That the kingdom of God should be a strongly positive force in the world is a point which does not need to be argued. If, however, disciples of Christ do not stand united in their witness about the kingdom, that force will be dissipated. This has already been touched on in connection with the matter of unity within the holy nation, as indeed on the question of separation from error. Both are crucial to a testimony which is true to the teaching of the New Testament. So also is the issue of relations with the nations of the world, for those in the kingdom of God, and comprising His holy nation, live their lives of Christian witness in an almost wholly secular society which discounts the things of the Spirit almost to vanishing point. Twentieth century civilisation has been appropriately dubbed a 'post-Christian' world. Thank God, nevertheless, that the Word continues to go out in life-giving power to the salvation of very many precious souls, and will do so till Jesus comes.

### **Failure in Witness**

Reverting briefly to the experience of God's old covenant people and nation, it is recorded that Abraham was promised, '... in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed' (Gen.12:3). Israel, while separate from the nations, was to be a source of radiating blessing, and hold an open door for any out of these nations who perceived in them the presence and purpose of God, and threw in their lot with God's people. Moab was cursed and separation from them was thorough-going for Israel. Yet the richness of the blessing accorded to the faithful Ruth was compound and lasting. Sadly, of course, sin and failure in Israel diminished their potential in regard to this purpose of God.

As already noted, their headship of the nations was not realised, and they even became a subject and subservient race for many years. Their decline and fall in this respect is poignantly illustrated at the individual level by Samson who, with all his strength and potential, came so low; aptly, if tragically, described by Milton as 'eyeless in Gaza'. How great was God's disappointment in His people, and how severe His judgement had to be, as elaborated in Ezekiel 16 at the time of the Babylonian captivity. Yet towards the end of that fateful passage God declared, 'Nevertheless I will remember my covenant with thee in the days of thy youth, and I will establish unto thee an everlasting covenant' (v.60). Their God, and ours, is a God '... slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth' (Ps.86:15). There has never been a day, down to the present, when those in the kingdom of God have not had ample reason to be thankful that such is His gracious character.

### **New Expectations**

Israel's rejection of Christ their King was a matter of profound sadness. Far from being separate from the nations around, and radiating blessing to them, the Jews, to their shame, conspired with the Romans for their Messiah's murder. The witness of Peter and John in Acts 4:27,28, was, 'For of a truth in this city against thy holy Servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, were gathered together, to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel foreordained to come to pass'. Henceforth God's expectations were centred on the 'nation bringing forth the fruits', to whom was committed the kingdom of God.

A new outflow of global blessing was to come to the nations of the world. 'Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world' (Matt.28:19,20). To

some extent the words of the apostle Peter in his first epistle were descriptive of the witness and service of God's New Testament kingdom, which had by then been established. He spoke of the saints as living stones, built up a spiritual house, and a holy priesthood. Having emphasised earlier the intimate connection between the spiritual house, the dwelling place of God, and the kingdom, priests unto His God and Father, we shall now consider further the service of the holy and royal priesthood as set out in 1 Peter 2:1-10.

### **Holy Priesthood Service**

The chief function and service of the holy priesthood is unmistakably set out in 1 Peter 2:5. It is the offering of '... spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ'. It is an offering to God, often described as 'Godward' service as distinct from the royal priesthood function which goes out to men and women, showing forth the excellencies of Him '... who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (v.9). The former seems clearly to call for a worship meeting of the church in which the clear purpose is giving to God of the riches of our meditation of Christ, in thanksgiving and praise. This spiritual exercise is so important that Peter mentions it first in his exposition of truth in this epistle. It calls for high priority in the spiritual service of the holy priesthood, following joyfully and reverently in the train of the psalmist, 'Give unto the LORD, O ye sons of the mighty, give unto the LORD glory and strength. Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness' (Ps.29:1,2).

Furthermore, the access of the people of God today to 'the holy place', as set out in Hebrews 10:19,20 is by way of '... the veil, that is to say, his flesh'; so providing a precious link between priestly worship and the flesh, or body, of Christ which is central in the Remembrance. Thus the service of worship and the Breaking of Bread, are very appropriate companion activities, and have come to be closely associated. In the church-

es of God today, these twin activities have the priority of the Lord's Day service, wherever possible in the morning of that day. A further strong link in the chain connecting the Remembrance and the service of holy priesthood worship, is the fact that the Breaking of Bread is described in 1 Corinthians 11:26 as proclaiming the Lord's death till He come. What can rank higher in theme of priestly worship than the redemptive work of Calvary, and the Person of '... the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me' (Gal.2:20)? Such is indeed an exhibition to men, angels and demons of the atoning death of God's Son, the central theme of praise for eternity.

### **The Epistle to the Hebrews**

The epistle to the Hebrews is one which calls for close attention by the disciple of Christ who is seriously concerned about the present-day expression of the kingdom of God. It is the epistle of '... the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man' (8:2). Here the risen Christ is displayed in all the glory of His high priestly work, '... priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek' (7:17). Here is depicted the wonderful access of a holy priesthood to 'the holy place'. 'Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by the way which he dedicated for us, a new and living way, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; and having a great priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart in fulness of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our body washed with pure water: let us hold fast the confession of our hope that it waver not; for he is faithful that promised' (10:19-23). This hope is not the Christian's assured prospect of eternal heavenly joy. It is concerned with priestly service today, referred to in Hebrews 6:19 as '... a hope both sure and steadfast and entering into that which is within the veil'; and in Hebrews 7:19 as '... a better hope, through which we draw nigh unto God'.



The purpose of God, initially defined at Sinai, for a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation' comes into its own in a redeemed, worshipping new covenant people. When John was given the messages for the seven churches in Asia, he first made clear how the Lord saw these beleaguered churches of God, some faltering, some lukewarm, or having lost their first love. The messages came '... from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by his blood; and he made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto his God and Father; to him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen' (Rev. 1:5,6). The churches addressed constituted a 'kingdom, priests unto his God and Father'. The Hebrews epistle is rich in the fulfilment of Old Testament types and shadows: '... even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service, and its sanctuary, a sanctuary of this world' (9:1). The holies, which a holy priesthood enters today in spirit, is a truly heavenly place presided over by the '... great priest over the house of God' (Heb.10:21) who '... by one offering ... hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified' (Heb.10:14).

### **Royal Priesthood Service**

As already observed, there is also the royal priesthood service, concerned with showing forth '... the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1 Pet.2:9). All of this recalls the priestly garments of Aaron and his sons in Old Testament times. As well as the pure linen garments for the service of the holy place, the sanctuary, on the Day of Atonement, there were garments for glory and for beauty, themselves also associated with sanctuary service, and for universal admiration. Their every feature spoke eloquently of the excellencies of Christ. This represents one of the very lovely old covenant foreshadowings of the surpassing splendours of the new (Lev.16; Ex.28).

Just as Israel was intended to be an endless source of blessing to all nations (Gen.12:3), so the Lord's all-embracing commission to His disciples was to '... make disciples of all the nations' (Matt.28:19). Associated with the failure of Israel to receive their King, are the words, 'God did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets' (Acts 15:14,15). This agrees perfectly with the Lord's command before His ascension, '... ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth' (Acts 1:8). In pursuing this divine objective, and extending God's kingdom in this world, His people will encounter all the complexities of a holy nation relating to a thoroughly secular society.

Its opportunities for witness will sometimes be constrained by the political attitude of the nation in which disciples faithfully seek to give their testimony to the gospel of the grace of God, to the kingdom of God, and to the whole counsel of God as exemplified in Paul's labours recounted in Acts 20. An open Bible and great freedom in many lands, lays a solemn responsibility on disciples of Christ to fulfil His purpose in His holy nation in full accord with 'all things whatsoever I commanded you'; to be faithful to the truths of '... the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints' (Jude v.3), the faith which brought disciples together in churches of God to form His kingdom.

### **Prayer and Good Works**

It is also true that part of the responsibility of the royal priesthood to show forth the excellencies of Christ, consists in not being '... weary in well-doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. So then, as we have opportunity, let us work that which is good toward all men, and especially toward them that are of the household of the faith' (Gal.6:9,10). An exercise to 'work that which is good toward all men' is a noble one. To the Ephesians Paul said, 'For we are his workmanship, created in Christ

Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared that we should walk in them' (Eph.2:10).

He had just the same in mind for Timothy when he wrote, 'Charge them that are rich in this present world, that they be not high-minded, nor have their hope set on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; that they do good, that they be rich in good works, that they be ready to distribute, willing to communicate; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on the life which is life indeed' (1 Tim.6:17-19). The tragedy of many non-Christian men and women, futilely placing reliance on good works to achieve divine favour and salvation, should not deter us from devotion to Christian charity. Many have been won for the Master through a ministry of good works. Yet even apart from that lovely outcome, the pursuit of simple kindness, perhaps to 'Rejoice with them that rejoice; weep with them that weep' (Rom.12:15), glorifies God and reflects true Christlikeness.

Finally, on the theme of good works, the noble work of prayer should not be forgotten. The holy nation is taught by the Spirit of God to have a burden of supplication for all men of every nation. 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations' (Mark 11:17). Paul's words to Timothy sum the matter up to perfection, and leave no doubt about the comprehensive responsibility that falls to us in this vital matter. 'I exhort therefore, first of all, that supplications, prayers, intercessions, thanksgivings, be made for all men' (1 Tim.2:1).

### **A Pattern of Service**

Attention was earlier drawn to the 'primitive' pattern of service of the Church of God in Jerusalem; not primitive with the promise of something better to supersede it, but representing the earliest establishment of the form of service of a church of God. This is in Acts 2:41,42 where those who had received the Word and been baptized and added, contin-

ued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers. When laid alongside 1 Peter 2, a pattern emerges made up of the vital elements of the Remembrance and worship; gospel outreach; close attention to collective prayer; a faithful adherence to the doctrine of the Lord in the New Testament, 'the apostles' teaching'; and to every aspect of true fellowship.

Such a pattern of service embraces the holy and royal priesthood services which have already been dealt with. It is comprehended in a few words by Paul in writing to the disciples in the Church of God in Corinth, 'God is faithful, through whom ye were called into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord' (1 Cor.1:9). These things recall the words of Hebrews 12:28,29, 'Wherefore, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us have grace, whereby we may offer service well-pleasing to God with reverence and awe: for our God is a consuming fire.' The kingdom may be given, and taken away, but in its essence it cannot be shaken, and will one day be revealed in all its true invincibility in millennial glory. Yet, as the custodians of that kingdom privilege today, God's people seek the grace to offer service well-pleasing to God. The seriousness and weight of the responsibility is underlined by the words, 'with reverence and awe'; and the sobering words are added, 'for our God is a consuming fire'.

### **Spiritual Conflict**

Now divine service, particularly that of the royal priesthood, involves conflict and struggle against external and internal forces. Paul's experience of spiritual conflict was full and varied, and it involved him in much physical suffering as well. To the Corinthians he wrote, '... in labours more abundantly ... in stripes above measure, in deaths oft' (2 Cor.11:23), and much more. Yet his concern was even deeper about the threat from within God's kingdom. At his stop-over near Ephesus when he called the elders of the church to conference at Miletus, some of his words were sombre, 'I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall

enter in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them' (Acts 20:29,30).

The flock Paul spoke of was 'the little flock' to whom the Lord promised to give the kingdom. It was under threat then, and it is under threat today; threat from inside as well as outside, and the former can be the more subtle and perplexing. 'Wherefore watch ye' (v.31) - wise words of solemn caution; and followed up by equally wise words of encouragement, 'And now I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you the inheritance among all them that are sanctified' (v.32). For the privilege of expressing the truths of the kingdom of God is without doubt a very precious inheritance.

### **Strength for Conflict**

So the conflict involved in the service of the holy nation and the kingdom of God is real and unrelenting. Yet the word of the Lord to His disciples, in anticipation of Pentecost, stands: '... ye shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit is come upon you' (Acts 1:8). Paul, writing somewhat sternly to the Corinthians, declared, 'For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power' (1 Cor.4:20). Empty, self-centred words were beginning to dominate the service of some in the Church of God in Corinth, and the apostle who had, in the beginning, preached to them 'Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God' (1:24) expected to see that same power, from the same source, at work in their service in God's house and kingdom. So it should be for those enjoying the same privileges today.

Paul had provided a splendid example in the spiritual conflict which is the lot of the holy nation. The end of his pilgrimage had come, and he writes to Timothy, 'Fight the good fight of the faith, lay hold on the life eternal, whereunto thou wast called, and didst confess the good confession in the sight of many witnesses' (1 Tim.6:12). It was not an ex-

hortation without an example for he followed up in his second epistle with, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day: and not only to me, but also to all them that have loved his appearing' (2 Tim.4:7,8). He was warning Timothy of those who '... will not endure the sound doctrine' (v.3). His spiritual battle had been the keeping of 'the faith'; the same faith that constrained Jude from his initial intention of writing of a '... common salvation', to exhort the disciples '... to contend earnestly for the faith'. It was '... once for all delivered unto the saints' (Jude v.3).

This latter expression surely leaves no doubt that the body of New Testament doctrine for disciples of Christ is laid down for faithful observance till Jesus comes; not for modification because of changing times, customs and 'situation ethics' which requires the accommodation of principles of right and wrong to prevailing circumstances. It will cost the members of the holy nation and kingdom today the same conflict of Pauline proportions to maintain it.

# CHAPTER EIGHT: HERITAGE AND DESTINY

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**A**n invaluable heritage of divine truth is presented to the disciple of Christ in Holy Scripture. What is particularly in view now is not the eternal inheritance of bliss that we have in Christ; the ‘... inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you’ (1 Pet.1:4); nor yet ‘... the inheritance of the saints in light’ into which we shall enter one day by virtue of the work of Calvary (Col.1:12). Rather, it is the matter of the ‘... pattern of sound words which thou hast heard from me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus’ (2 Tim.1:13).

## **Heritage**

Following up the linkage of old covenant experience of God’s kingdom with that of the new, men of the Old Testament can be recalled who learned the value and importance of their national heritage. This emerges very preciously in 2 Samuel 23:11,12 where we meet Shammah, one of David’s valiant warriors, who inherited a modest plot of lentils which came under threat by the Philistines. It represented only a tiny part of Israel’s national heritage, but it must be defended. With similar steadfast courage, Naboth said to Ahab the king, ‘The LORD forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee’ (1 Kin.21:3). Naboth defended a sacred trust and paid with his life for his loyalty. Examples could be multiplied, such as Caleb’s noble request, ‘... give me this mountain ... and Joshua blessed him; and he gave Hebron unto Caleb ... for an inheritance’ (Josh.14:12,13).

## **Timothy’s Legacy**

It was shown in earlier chapters that the very survival of the kingdom of priests and holy nation depends on obedience and faithfulness to the word of the Lord. Solemn comment has been made on the inheritance in the kingdom of God which can be lost through unrighteousness (1 Cor.5:6). This matter obviously lay heavily on Paul's mind and heart in the latter days of his life. He wrote of his concern to Timothy, a young man on whom much was going to depend. His two pastoral letters to Timothy are full of deep concern for his continuing defence of the faith; the faith the noble and ageing servant of Christ had so assiduously defended to the end.

Deploring the emergence of some who would 'fall away from the faith', he reminded Timothy of the mind of God in the things under discussion, and continued, 'If thou put the brethren in mind of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Christ Jesus ... these things command and teach' (1 Tim.4:6,11). It is necessary to stress the absolute authority of Scripture in the defence of the faith. Again, in closing his first epistle, the apostle pleads, 'O Timothy, guard that which is committed unto thee ...' (6:20); and, not many verses into the second letter, 'That good thing which was committed unto thee guard through the Holy Spirit which dwelleth in us' (2 Tim.1:14). Paul had already commented on the heritage of faith which Timothy had from his mother and grandmother (1:5), and was to revert to this priceless legacy in the words, '... from a babe thou hast known the sacred writings which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus' (3:15).

So it was now for Timothy in his turn to take on board from his faithful mentor the strong exhortation, 'And the things which thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also' (2 Tim.2:2). To the Romans Paul had written, '... ye became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching whereunto ye were delivered' (6:17): that form, or pattern, of teaching, the pattern of sound words which Timothy must hold. The echo of



God's command to Moses comes from Sinai, 'And see that thou make them after their pattern, which hath been shewed thee in the mount' (Ex.25:40).

### **Destiny**

Chapter two touched briefly on the purpose and destiny which God had in mind for the nations in general, and for His holy nation in particular. This led to a consideration of Daniel's prophecy, and God's revelation to Nebuchadnezzar of some of His universal purposes for the end time of this world's history. Successive human kingdoms and empires are presented in Nebuchadnezzar's image, and the climax of the latter-day empire which was '... part of iron, and part of clay' (Dan.2:33), was to be utter destruction by the '... stone ... cut out ... without hands' (v.45). It is not possible to expand here on these prophecies, but simply to note the wide convergence of Christian opinion that they depict the triumph of the King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev.19:16). This was prophesied unmistakably by the Lord in His discourses on the end times as recorded by Matthew and Luke. There He told of a time when, '... they shall come from the east and west, and from the north and south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God' (Luke 13:29). To His enquiring disciples He promised, 'I appoint unto you a kingdom, even as my Father appointed unto me, that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom; and ye shall sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel' (Luke 22:29,30).

It is not difficult to relate the prophecies of Daniel, and the words of the Lord, to the revelation given to the apostle John. The Dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet emerge in a triumvirate of evil and rebellion against God (Rev.12:13). 'And the seventh angel sounded; and there followed great voices in heaven, and they said, The kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ: and he shall reign for ever and ever' (Rev.11:15). Here is a truly climactic point in the assertion of divine power, indeed in the development of divine purpos-

es about the kingdom of God. It also marks the establishment of God's millennial rule over the nations of the world, whose fortunes have been traced here from early days, especially in relation to God's holy nation of both old and new covenant times. The words of Revelation 11 continue, 'And the four and twenty elders, which sit before God on their thrones, fell upon their faces, and worshipped God, saying, We give thee thanks, O Lord God, the Almighty, which art and which wast; because thou hast taken thy great power, and didst reign' (vv.16,17). Then the words, '... the nations were wroth'.

They had been working diligently towards a world union, political, commercial, and religious, but the time had come for the revelation of the millennial kingdom of God, with the conquest of the beast and his armies (Rev.19:19,20; 20:1-6). Then truly, '... a king shall reign in righteousness' (Is.32:1), and all the blessed characteristics of any expression of the kingdom of God will be manifested in fullest splendour.

When the final rebellion is suppressed at the end of the days of the millennial kingdom, John writes, 'I saw a new heaven and a new earth' (Rev.21:1). It is very interesting that, having seen mankind ordered in nations in the early days of its history, God still speaks of 'the nations' in relation to the holy city, new Jerusalem. 'And the nations shall walk amidst the light thereof: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory into it ... and they shall bring the glory and the honour of the nations into it' (Rev.21:24,26). What will these nations be like? How will they be governed? Little detail is revealed, but we may be confident that God's original ideals for men and nations will then be realised.

The servants of the kingdom today, the people of the holy nation, rest in the joyful anticipation that, '... his servants shall do him service; and they shall see his face' (Rev.22:3,4). 'And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And he that heareth, let him say, Come ... He which testifieth

these things saith, Yea: I come quickly. Amen: come, Lord Jesus' (Rev. 22:17, 20).

## POSTSCRIPT

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It is hoped that the treatment given here to the subject of the kingdom of God and the holy nation will stimulate serious reflection by many fellow-believers, as well as offering some encouragement and instruction on the truths explored. Every attempt has been made to be faithful to Scripture in relation to old covenant times, the present dispensation of grace, and in respect of the future purposes of God.

The case was made earlier that faith in the atoning work of the Saviour does not alone secure entry into the kingdom of God. Moreover, it is pertinent to ask whether the New Testament should be expected to leave Christians in doubt about their position in respect of the kingdom. Did not the apostles to whom the Lord expounded 'the things concerning the kingdom of God' know His requirements for those who should be included? They certainly were in no doubt, as already shown, about certain whose inheritance in the kingdom of God could be forfeited. This issue has been emphasised because of its central importance in the way the kingdom and nation is viewed. Older writers used to stress, with regard to churches in the New Testament forming God's kingdom, that there was 'a within and a without'. Slightly quaint as the expression may seem today, it is nonetheless true, as shown in 1 Corinthians 5:12: 'For what have I to do with judging them that are without? Do not ye judge them that are within?'

The churches of God today, in recognising the New Testament ideal and aspiring, in much acknowledged failure and human weakness, to express it, do not seek to judge the spiritual service of others. They must say that they believe the latter's position in various Christian denominations falls short of 'the faith', defined as the whole body of New Testament teaching for believers, individually and collectively; and hence also short of ex-

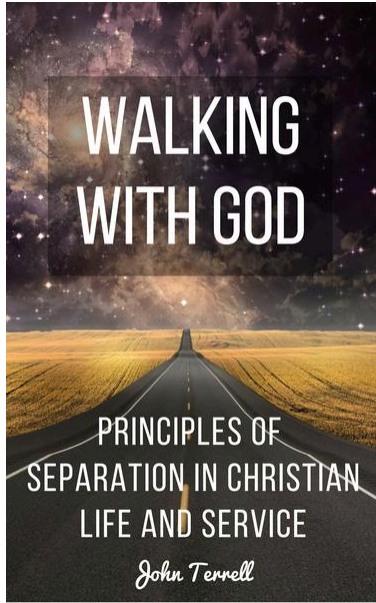
pressing the kingdom of God. Yet they do believe that the Kingdom exists today in churches of God gathered according to the New Testament pattern.

The judgement seat of Christ will be the revealing place, and the Judge of all the earth will do right. He will evaluate each believer's life and service, and the wise Christian approaches that day with reverence and awe, however he has felt guided in his service to his Master on earth. Wherever, and however, individual Christians display the lovely characteristics of the kingdom of God in their lives - righteousness, peace and joy (Rom.14:17) - the Master's heart must be gladdened. They are, however, invited also to consider carefully the issues of collective service set out in this book; and whether they can share in this in churches of God in a scriptural unity, which would surely give joy to the Lord.

God is holy, and therefore His kingdom would also need to be a holy nation. This book explores, from the Bible, the principles and characteristics of nationality in general and their particular application first to God's Old Testament kingdom of Israel, and then to its New Testament counterpart, that was established by the Lord Jesus Christ. The constitution, government, service, and destiny of God's kingdom are traced from earliest times to the ultimate realisation of the purposes of God in a new heaven and a new earth, but with special reference to the character and the challenge of the Kingdom of God today.



Did you love *The Kingdom of God and the Holy Nation*? Then you should read *Walking With God: Principles of Separation in Christian Life and Service* by JOHN TERRELL!



It's never been easy to a disciple of Jesus; it often involves forsaking people, ambitions or associations as we answer the call of "Follow Me".

This book traces the principles of separation for service, from the time of Abraham to the present. It examines the practical issues of discipleship and stresses the strongly positive intent of God's purpose in separation.



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