

Earthly Expectations

God dealt with his chosen nation, Israel, for so long that their spiritual perceptions were always clouded by nationalism. At the time of Jesus' ministry the Jews were in subjection to the Romans. They hoped for the *Messiah* to restore their kingdom. Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17) and he gave many teachings and parables indicating the spiritual nature of his kingdom. But earthly expectations had become a sort of mental block even though Jesus revealed himself as the Messiah by the undeniable proof of his resurrection

After his extensive teaching and proof of his Messiahship, it must have been with deep disappointment that he listened to the question of his chosen students shortly before his ascension. They did not ask, "Is your spiritual reign about to begin?" Rather, they inquired, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:6-8). They still had earthly expectations. They hardly seemed qualified to be spiritual leaders in a spiritual kingdom.

Israel still relied on the promises made to David. "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. . . . And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever" (2 Sam. 7:12-16). The Jews failed to grasp that this projected infinitely further in meaning than just to David's earthly kingdom. That physical, earthly throne certainly had not been made sure through the intervening centuries.

A few days after the apostles' questioning, Peter, speaking by the Spirit on Pentecost, made the proper connection. In a climactic conclusion of his discourse, he declared, "Brethren, I may say to you confidently of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon his throne, he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear. . . . Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:29-36). Jesus was that descendant of David, and he had ascended a few days earlier to his throne to begin his reign over the spiritual kingdom..

Those submitting to baptism on Pentecost became the subjects of the King, changing their citizenship from the earthly to the heavenly. Of some who held to Judaism later, Paul sadly asserted, "their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:19-20; NIV). Gentile disciples were also told, "...you are ... fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household>" (Eph. 2:19).

In view of this it seems incredible that countless believers expect Jesus to return to earth, set up an earthly kingdom, and reign as an earthly king in spite of his very words, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). Is the earthly to replace the spiritual?

The disciples had heard all his parables about the kingdom but they had failed to grasp their meaning. Unfortunately, too many of us have followed their thinking. We have given lengthy, involved discourses on the parables of the tares and dragnet (Matt.13:36-47), the importunate widow (Luke 18:1-8), the pounds (Luke 19:11-27), the barren fig tree (Matt. 21; Mark 11), the wicked husbandman (Matt. 21), the marriage of the king's son (Matt. 22), and the judgment parables (Matt. 25) applying them to ourselves. Those parables, and others, dealt with God's imminent reckoning with Israel for their rejection of him. Their nation would suffer the terminating consequences within the lifetime of some of them. The earthly kingdom was to be superseded by the spiritual kingdom. The very purpose God had in separating the nation of Israel was to bring Christ and his universal spiritual reign into this world. We miss the truth and devalue that goal when we turn it into an earthly expectation.

God's selection of Jacob and the nation he made through him was undeserved. God was faithful to his purpose in spite of their apostasies. The special favor was to a nation collectively, not meaning that each citizen was counted righteous. Many of David's psalms were praise for victory over national enemies, like "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" in the beloved 23rd Psalm.. There were even prayers for God to cruelly destroy those who opposed Israel. That earthly system which prevailed before Christ was not typical of the spiritual kingdom which includes the people of God today. To expect a restoration of such a system is to look backward from Christ in seeking restoration of a system which he dissolved. It would demand reinstatement of a civil/religious state government based upon law, with righteousness being dependent upon keeping a code of law.

Because God was dealing with Israel as a religious/political nation, his covenant with them was based on law. It was a nation with a "State church" arrangement. A person kept civil and religious requirements by fulfilling law. When a person tithed, for example, he was not "giving" any more than you "give" to the IRS. He was obeying a law. He was paying an "income tax" off the top of his increase to support his government which was administered by the religious – the Levites. There were no other taxes until they changed the system from a Theocracy to a monarchy by choosing a king. The Levites administered both the civil and religious functions of their nation.

Those who would suggest a tithe as a standard for Christian "giving" today choose a poor basis for it. Every employed disciple in our land "gives" several times more than a tithe of his income in taxes and contributions when we include combined civil and religious obligations as the Jews did.

That is just another example of our mixing earthly concepts with the spiritual. We tend to make our pie of mixed fruit. Fruit cocktail pie has not caught on except in religion! Another strange twist relates to dietary rules given Israel. Some sincere disciples refrain from eating foods forbidden by the Law of Moses. They suppose those foods were forbidden because they were not healthful foods. A physical reason. If God had been giving rules of health, why would he not have told them of bacteria, sterilization, pasteurization, and other simple rules of sanitation?

When one violated a dietary rule, the result was not sickness but ceremonial uncleanness. Evidently, many of the rules of the law were to steer Israel away from spiritual contamination. The pagans and idol worshippers had cultic regulations and meanings to certain foods. Israel was to avoid such idolatrous connections.

In commenting on the resurrection, Paul informed, “But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual” (1 Cor. 15:46). That principle applies to kingdom matters also. Paul chided believers who were trying hold to Christ and Jewish nationalism based on law, “Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?” (Gal. 3:3). That question still reverberates throughout the kingdom today.

“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Cor. 5:1). Heavenly, spiritual expectations! []