An Alternative Interpretation of the Parables of Matthew 13.

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The typical interpretation of the parables of Matthew 13 is that they deal with conditions on earth between the first and second advents of the King, Jesus. That understanding forces the interpreter to deal with the meaning of the phrase "the kingdom of heaven" (literally, "the kingdom of the heavens") which is found in Matt. 13:11, 24, 31, 33, 34, 45, 47, and 52.

Those who are Amillennialists identify "the kingdom of heaven" as the present reign of Jesus at the right hand of His Father in a spiritual kingdom in heaven. They deny that Jesus envisioned a future literal, political kingdom here upon earth, in which Jesus would reign over Israel and the world from Jerusalem. Israel, they say, forfeited any right to a literal kingdom when the nation crucified its Messiah. The Church is spiritual Israel. The Church replaces, or supersedes, Israel, and the Church on earth is the closest to an earthly kingdom that this present world will ever know. The predictions of a glorious kingdom of Israel are to be understood in a metaphorical sense, fulfilled in the Church and in Eternity. The statements in Revelation 20 of a 1,000 year reign are not meant to be taken literally, but metaphorically represent Christ's present spiritual kingdom. There always has been, is, and will be, only one people of God. Israel as a nation has no future as a nation. Jewish people who accept Jesus as their Messiah have significance only as being part of the Church. So again, Amillennialists believe "the kingdom of heaven" is Jesus' present spiritual kingdom in which the Church has replaced Israel.

Those who are Progressive Dispensationalists say that Jesus is reigning presently in an "already" sense – and that He is doing so in an "inaugurated" kingdom that is spiritual in nature. They believe that references to "the Kingdom of Heaven" in Matthew are to be seen in the sense of a present-day spiritual manifestation of the "inaugurated" kingdom. Jesus is presently sitting upon the throne of David, which, they say, must necessarily be up in heaven at the right hand of His Father. Unlike the Amillennialists, they insist that Jesus will one day reign in an earthly, political kingdom over the world from Jerusalem. That, they say, is the "not yet" portion of the kingdom. In consequence, Progressive Dispensationalists are comfortable with saying that the Kingdom of Heaven is "already," but "not yet." They would interpret the references to the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew 13 as describing the "already" portion of Christ's kingdom. They acknowledge that His present Kingdom is merely spiritual. But they do not deny that there will also be a future political kingdom here on this present earth. But they deny that there are two peoples of God – saved Jews and the Church. They, like Amillennialists, insist that there is only one people of God. Though they would see a future for Israel, their understanding minimizes that significance. There will always be only one people of God throughout eternity.

Those who are Traditional Dispensationalists are uncomfortable with an interpretation of the "Kingdom of Heaven" that defines that Kingdom as presently taking place. They believe that Jesus has not yet begun to reign in the sense that believing Jewish people in Old Testament times or that First Century Jewish believers would have understood. They believe that references in Matthew 13 to "the Kingdom of the Heavens" are to be understood as the future, Messianic, Davidic, Millennial Kingdom prophesied in the Old Testament and reaffirmed in the New. They

see the references to the "Kingdom of the Heavens" in Matthew 13 as identifying a political, earthly kingdom, yet one that, at the same time, certainly has spiritual requirements and spiritual overtones.

The difficulty with the Traditional Dispensational interpretation is in harmonizing the time frame of the "Kingdom of Heaven" in Matthew 13 with their interpretation of that Kingdom. They concede that the parables of Matthew 13 describe the time between the two advents of Christ. That amounts to saying that the parables describe what is happening in the Church Age. Yet Jesus used the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven," not "Church Age." How is it consistent to say that Jesus is describing what is happening in the Church Age when He defines it as "the Kingdom of Heaven?" And how can one avoid the conclusion that both Amillennialists and Progressive Dispensationalists have made, that in one form or another, we are already in the Kingdom?

Traditional Dispensationalists attempt to evade this dilemma by redefining what Jesus is describing. They concede that people can enter the Kingdom of Heaven" presently – they are called "Sons of the Kingdom" in Matthew 13:38, for example. They also say that the Kingdom is being announced. I myself have referred to the "Recruitment Stage of the Kingdom of Heaven." But Traditionalists insist that the Kingdom has not yet begun. They point to Jesus' model prayer in which He instructs His followers to request, "Your kingdom come; Your will be done – as in heaven, so on earth" (Matt. 6:10, author's translation). They also point to Jesus' parable in Luke 19:12–27, which Jesus told to disabuse his disciples of the notion that the "kingdom of God was going to appear immediately" (Luke 19:11). So there is considerable justification for maintaining that the kingdom of heaven which Jesus described in his parables in Matthew 13 is wholly future, and not present. The King has not yet returned to rule. But at the same time, how can one be consistent and call the present Church Age the "Kingdom of Heaven" if the latter term refers to a political kingdom that cannot begin until Jesus returns in power and great glory?

It is because of this conundrum that I offer up a different interpretation, admittedly, a novel one. I have never read another commentator who proposes this view. For that reason, it is with a certain amount of trepidation that I offer this alternative view to the Traditional Dispensational interpretation. And yet I feel compelled to do so to harmonize the difficulties inherent in all three views mentioned above. Here is my solution.

When Jesus described progress of "the Kingdom of the Heavens" in Matthew 13, He was not primarily describing the course of history between the two advents of Christ. That may be a partial fulfillment or a pre-fulfillment application, but it was not that to which Jesus was referring. What He was describing was primarily the course of events during the Millennium, not the Church Age.

There are, admittedly, observable correlations between the Church and the Millennial Age. Both begin in a state of purity. The adherents of the early church were pure. One hundred percent of people who attached to the Church initially were believers in Jesus. There were no pretenders. People like Ananias and Saphira who, I believe, were genuine believers, were,

nevertheless, rooted out of the Church in its beginning stage. At Ananias and Saphira's demise, "great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things" (Acts 5:11). "But none of the rest dared to associate with them" (Acts 5:13). Similarly, the Millennial Kingdom will begin with utter purity. The people left behind in their natural bodies to inherit the Millennial Kingdom will all be believers. All rebel Israelis will have been disposed of prior to the beginning of the Kingdom (Ezek. 20:33-38; Matt. 25:1-30; Luke 19:11-27). Likewise all Gentile military opponents of the King will have been destroyed in battle (Ezek. 14:1-15; Rev. 19:11-21). And all Gentiles who survived the Tribulation but were unsympathetic to the King and His "brothers" will have been removed from the face of the earth (Matt. 25:31-46). So only Jews and Gentiles who are genuine believers in Jesus as the Messiah will be left alive to inherit the Millennial Earth in their natural bodies (Matt. 5:1-5, ff.).

But as time went on, the visible church came to be infiltrated by imposters who were not genuine believers. Paul warned against this very thing (Acts 20:28-32), as did other New Testament writers (2 Pet. 2:1-3, 10-22; Jude 1:3-4, ff.). Church History is replete with pretenders of Christianity. Similarly, the Millennial Kingdom of Christ, over a period of time, will be infiltrated by imposters who will have been born to their believing parents. Satan will be imprisoned in the Abyss during the Millennium, and he and his demons will be unable to deceive the growing number of residents of Millennial earth (Rev. 20:1-3). But not all of those born during the Kingdom will become believers in Jesus as their own King. They will submit outwardly, but their hearts will not be with him.

The same phenomenon can be witnessed, for example, in present day America. When George W. Bush was President, people on the left did not believe in him as their President. And when Barack Obama became President, people on the right did not believe in him as their President.

At the close of the Millennial Kingdom, the hearts of the people of the earth will be exposed. Satan will be released from the Abyss, and he will succeed in duping millions of people dwelling on the Millennial Earth to revolt against King Jesus. They will advance from the four corners of the earth to surround the Camp of Jesus' soldiers and the beloved city, Jerusalem. But they will not succeed in overthrowing the King and His regime. Fire will come down from heaven and destroy the rebels. Their deceiver, Satan will be thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone (Rev. 20:7-10).

The point I am making is this. There is no good exegetical reason for denying that whatever Jesus said in Matthew 13, He was primarily describing His Millennial Kingdom. Since there are similarities between the two time periods, the description Jesus gave of the course of events during the Millennium can also apply to the Church Age. But it was not Jesus' primary concern to describe the course of events of the Church Age. His primary concern was to describe the course of events of the Millennial Kingdom. That is why he described the time period in Matthew 13 as "the kingdom of the heavens." With that in mind, let me offer a brief re-interpretation of the parables of the Kingdom in Matthew 13.

The Parable of the Four Soils

The Parable of the Four Soils. Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23. In this parable, Jesus did not make any explicit comparison with the Kingdom of the Heavens. So what is true in this parable is always true, both during the Church Age and during the Kingdom Age. He does, however, speak about "the word [message] of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:18). The message about the Kingdom is certainly appropriate during the Church Age. One might think this message would be unnecessary during the Kingdom. But on the other hand, people from nations all over the world will gravitate to Jerusalem to hear the King teach about His Kingdom (Isaiah 2:3). And so, I am confident that, during the Millennium, Jesus will continually educate people about the true nature of His Kingdom, which is the Kingdom of the Heavens.

Immediately, some objections to this interpretation may spring to mind. Let me raise those objections and attempt to respond to them.

Objection #1: The "evil one ... snatches what has been sown in his heart" (Matt. 13:18). This cannot happen during the Kingdom, for Satan will be bound for a thousand years. Response: However, it could happen at the end of the Kingdom, after Satan has been released from the Abyss. And evidently it will happen.

Objection #2: One would not think that, during the Millennium, "affliction or persecution" would arise "because of the word" (message), with the result that "immediately he falls away" (Matt. 13:21). Response: However, it could happen after the conclusion of the Millennium. And one wonders if there will not be a quiet, covert rebellion against the King even while Satan is prevented from deceiving. Surely there will be a growing number of people in the Kingdom who, in their hearts, find the high spiritual standards of the King impossible and even grounds for resentment. This will be true because they never will become "born again," and so they will not really enter the kingdom (John 3:3-8). They will be present physically within the kingdom sphere, but not spiritually. There will not be open rebellion, but will there not be quiet discussions amongst those who do not identify with the King and His ardent supporters? One would think so, so long as the protests do not grow too vocal or eventuate in open rebellion.

Objection #3: One would not intuitively think that "the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth" would choke out the message of the Kingdom so that it becomes unfruitful (Matt. 13:22). Response: On the other hand, perhaps they would, at least in the heart of a nonbeliever living in the Kingdom Age.

With regard to the bearing of fruit, one can certainly see how, even in the Millennium, genuine believers could respond appropriately to the message of the Kingdom and bring forth varying amounts of fruit for the benefit of the King and His Kingdom (Matt. 13:23).

The Parable of the Tares Among the Wheat

The Parable of the Tares Among the Wheat. Matt. 13:24-30; 36-43. Jesus explicitly identifies the features of this parable. The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world; the good seed are the sons of the kingdom; the tares are the sons of the evil one; the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are the angels (Matt. 13:37-39)

In a certain sense, each of these elements could occur in both the present Age (the Church Age) and the Kingdom Age (the Millennium). The chief difficulty in the Kingdom, however, is that in the Kingdom, the Devil will be chained in the Abyss. It seems less than accurate to term the ones who have not internally placed confidence in the King during the Thousand Years as "sons of the evil one." However, they do not outwardly rebel until *after* the devil has been released from the abyss, and until *after* he has deceived them (Rev. 20:7-9a). So, if they were not sons of the evil one throughout the Millennium, since he is absent, they certainly become sons of the evil one after the end of the Millennium.

In both cases, the harvest could refer to the end of the age – at the end of the Church Age followed by the Tribulation; and at the end of the Millennial Age. Jesus' explanation that He, as the Son of Man, will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and throw them into the furnace of fire, in one sense, fits the action at the end of the Millennium better than the actions at the end of the Tribulation. Certainly the rebels after the end of the Millennium can more easily said to be "gathered out of His kingdom" than can unbelievers at the end of the Tribulation, for the Kingdom has not yet even begun in the latter instance. And how can "sons of the evil one," in any meaningful sense, be now participating in a spiritual kingdom that is presently in operation?

The difficulty with the Kingdom view is that the "sons of the evil one" are not said to be "thrown into the furnace of fire" in Rev. 20:9. Rather, fire is thrown down on them from heaven. However, presumably all those upon whom the fire rains in Rev. 20:9 will also be thrown into the Lake of Fire and Brimstone (Rev. 20:11-15).

The phrase, "The Righteous will shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father" (Matt. 13:43) might just as easily, if not more easily, designate the role of the righteous in the Eternal State rather than in the Millennium, although both would be true. However, in the Eternal State, all believers will possess resurrected and glorified bodies. In the Millennium, not all believers will possess resurrected and glorified bodies. Only some will. Moreover, the phrase, "the Kingdom of their Father" more readily lends itself to a description of the Kingdom in the Eternal State than it does to the Kingdom of the Messiah that lasts for a thousand years (contrast Matt. 19:28 and 25:31 with 1 Cor. 15:24-28 and Rev. 22:3).

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

The Parable of the Mustard Seed. Matt. 13:31-32. This parable fits the Kingdom Age as easily as it does the Church Age. The growth from a very small entity to a large one certainly applies to the size of the Church at the beginning (120 people) in comparison to what it has become today (perhaps 2 billion professing Christians). Certainly the corrupting influence signified by the birds in the tree and corresponding with the cults and aberrant theology present all over Christendom today is well documented.

By the same token, the people comprising Christ's Millennial Kingdom will start out relatively small in number in comparison to what earth's total population will be at the end of the Millennium. The corrupting influence represented by the birds will certainly take its toll on multitudes of people alive on earth by the end of the Millennium. The number of those who will revolt against the King will be like the sand upon the seashore (Rev. 20:8).

Conclusion: the Parable of the Mustard Seed describes the course of the Kingdom Age as easily as it does the Church Age. The difficulty with applying it to the Church Age is that the neither the Church nor the Tribulation constitutes the Kingdom.

The Parable of the Leaven in the Dough

The Parable of the Leaven in the Dough. Matt. 13:33. Like the preceding parable, this parable seems to incorporate the presence of corruption in the Kingdom. Corruption has certainly been true of the Church Age, but it also aptly describes the Kingdom. Situationally, this parable could fit in equally well as descriptive of the visible Church and as descriptive of the visible Kingdom. The difficulty with applying it to the Church Age is that the Church is not the Kingdom.

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure. Matt. 13:44. The relevance of this parable to either the Church Age or to the Kingdom Age depends largely upon the interpretation one places upon the parable. What is the treasure hidden in the field? Who is the man who finds it, who hides it again, and who joyfully sells all he owns in order to possess it?

If the finder is Christ, and if the treasure is the Church (or the elect), and if the selling of all he possesses is Christ giving His life for the Church, then this parable certainly makes sense as applying to Jesus' dying upon the cross to redeem us.

But if the treasure is the Kingdom of the Heavens, and the man who finds it is an ordinary person, and if he sacrifices all that he has to come into possession of the Kingdom of the Heavens, there is no reason why this could not as easily apply to the person living in the Kingdom Age as it does to someone living in the Church Age. Applying this parable to the Millennial Kingdom has the added benefit that the Church is not called the Kingdom.

The Parable of the Pearl of Great Value

The Parable of the Pearl of Great Value. Matt. 13:45-46. What was said about the Parable of the Hidden Treasure can just as easily apply to this parable. If the finder is Christ, and if the pearl is the Church (or the elect), then the finder's sacrifice to purchase the pearl can easily represent Christ's sacrifice of His life for the Church. But if the treasure is the Kingdom of the Heavens, and the man who finds it is an ordinary person, and if he sacrifices all he has to come into possession of the Kingdom, there is no reason why this parable could not as easily apply to the person living in the Kingdom Age as it does to someone living in the Church Age. Once again, this latter interpretation carries with it the added advantage of not forcing a "Kingdom" definition on the Church Age when the King has not even returned, and the world is open rebellion against God and His Anointed.

The Parable of the Dragnet

The Parable of the Dragnet. 13:47-50. Much like the Parable of the Tares among the Wheat, this parable fits in just as well with the end of the Kingdom Age as it does with the conclusion of the Church Age and the Tribulation immediately following. Angels will sort out the unrighteous from the righteous and will cast the unrighteous into the Lake of Fire and Brimstone (Rev. 20:11-15) prior to the Eternal State of the Kingdom of the Heavens.

The Newness as Well as Oldness of Truths about the Kingdom of the Heavens

The newness as well as oldness of truths about the Kingdom of the Heavens. 13:51-52. If the Kingdom of the Heavens refers to the Church Age, then that which is "old" about the Kingdom is only that there is a spiritual dimension to the Kingdom. That which is "new" about the Kingdom, at least if one adopts an Amillennial interpretation, is that there is no political dimension and promises to Israel regarding a future glorious kingdom are worthless. The King would be absent the entire time, Israel would never even recognize Jesus as King, and evil would prevail, right up to the time of the end. That can hardly be what Jesus had in mind.

If the Kingdom of the Heavens refers to the Messianic Kingdom, then that which is "old" about the Kingdom is that it is a Political Kingdom with Spiritual overtones ruled by the Messiah in person. What would be "new" about the Kingdom is that evil would coexist with good and that Satan would work hard to overthrow and sabotage the Kingdom. All of this would take place over a long period of time, remedied only by judgment at the end of the Kingdom.

Conclusion

No matter which interpretation is taken, there are a certain amount of problems. That is true no matter whether one interprets as an Amillennialist, a Progressive Dispensationalist, or a Traditional Dispensationalist. Moreover, there are also problems with the view I am presenting. (Incidentally, for the purposes of the Matthew 13 Parables discussion, I would call my view that of a Millennial Dispensationalist.)

By way of clarification I would describe the Millennial Dispensationalist interpretation of Matthew 13 as follows: The primary purposes of Jesus' parables in Matthew 13 were threefold – (1) To inform His disciples that, when it arrived, His Messianic Kingdom would not be an unmitigated drawing card for all peoples. In fact, when being told the Message about the Kingdom, most people would ultimately not respond in a genuine and persevering way. Some would not even understand, while for others, circumstances would appear to erect a barrier against pursuing the values of the Kingdom. The message of the nature and value of the Kingdom will need to be preached during the Millennium. (2) To inform His disciples that a walk with God through submission to His Messiah is a walk of the heart, not merely an outward performance. Many, sadly, during the Millennium, will merely go through the motions of following and submitting to the King. When given the opportunity to revolt by a deceptive adversary, Satan, hordes of people will attempt to overthrow the King and His administration and army. (3) To inform His disciples that all impurities and impure people must be purged out of His Kingdom. This is consistent with Paul's statement that Jesus will reign until He has abolished all rule, authority, and power, and until He has put all His enemies under His feet, including death itself (1 Cor. 15:24-26). Praise God, those who outwardly appear to comply with the King, but who are really noncompliant and revolt against Him will be overwhelmed at the end. The angels will draw them to the place of their demise, and fire will descend from heaven to consume them. Ultimately they will be resurrected to face Jesus, the King, at the Great White Throne Judgment, and the angels will cast them into the Lake of Fire and Brimstone, which burns eternally (Rev. 20:10-15). Such are the purposes of the Parables of Matthew 13.

Primary Interpretation: The primary interpretation of these parables is a description of conditions that exist during the Davidic, Messianic, Millennial Kingdom of Christ here upon earth. Jesus' disciples, of course, appeared unable to grasp, right up to the moment of His departure, that this Kingdom was not going to appear immediately (Luke 19:11; Acts 1:6). In fact, Jesus' return to earth to set up His political kingdom with spiritual overtones has been delayed now (from man's standpoint), nearly two millennia. Meanwhile, Jesus is in the process of building His Church, as He announced to Peter and the twelve (Matt. 16:18).

Secondary Application: A secondary application is that, though the present Church Age, in which Jesus is building His Church, is not the Kingdom, it nonetheless bears certain resemblances to the Kingdom. (1) The Church is not an unmitigated success in drawing people to the values of coming Kingdom. (2) Many identify with the church but are actually imposters. (3) At the end of the current era, when Jesus returns to establish His Kingdom, all who have not submitted to the King will be purged. Having said that, the Church is not to be confused with Jesus' Kingdom. It is the age of recruitment for the Kingdom during the King's absence. Right now the King is absent, and evil abounds largely unpunished. Therefore it is inappropriate to identify the present age as the Messianic, Davidic Kingdom promised by the Old Testament Prophets and also by Jesus Himself. The Church may have certain resemblances to the Kingdom, but it is not the Kingdom. The Kingdom is not "already," and it has not been inaugurated.

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