

Society and the Kingdom of God¹

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I. BIBLICAL AND EARLY BACKGROUND

(a) *The Teaching of Jesus.* The Synoptic Gospels present us with the 'Gospel of the Kingdom' taking a central place in the teaching of Jesus, so much so that many scholars have believed that the proper understanding of the meaning of 'the Kingdom' is the only key to the significance of that Teaching. Clearly it must be read against the Old Testament background, where the Hebrew, believing that the Lord is King, longed for the day on which His reign would be open and universal. In later Judaism despair of the present world order had led to an apocalyptic interpretation which expected this to happen at a stroke, and which detected no link between the present order of things and the longed-for Kingdom.

The attempt of Weiss and Schweitzer to interpret the teaching of Jesus as wholly conditioned by this apocalyptic view has not established itself. Our Lord's ministry contains much which claims that the Kingdom in an effective sense has already dawned. Later in the New Testament this is still assumed. The Christian, living in this world, is yet a 'citizen of heaven'. This may help to explain the relative infrequency of references to the Kingdom outside the Gospels, for the Church is the new Israel, and it is to Israel that the Kingdom was promised. Those that are 'in Christ' are already introduced to spiritual treasures which belong to that citizenship, nor are these ever enjoyed in isolation. The *koinonia* in the primitive community, especially the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile in Christ, is the great new reality which marks the Church. There is still the note of longing, but the very love of the brethren is the token that they have passed from death to life. The Kingdom is present, realized in pardon, grace and joy, expressed in fellowship, and these are the foretaste of its fulfilment.

(b) *The Early Church.* While the New Testament contains a strong note of expectation, it also accepts the Gospel as having implications for daily life in society. Parents and children, masters

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and slaves are to live out the new life here and now. The teaching of Jesus including a story like that of the Good Samaritan gave no excuse for withdrawal into a totally 'unworldly' life, and the pungent comments of both St. James and St. John show that the lesson was not forgotten. Christ now reigns at God's right hand, and, even if His reign is still hidden from the world, that is no reason why it should not be manifest in the Church, the body of which He is head.

Beyond the New Testament it continues to be assumed that the quality of Christian life should reflect the divine rule. 'See how these Christians love one another' was not originally said in scorn. A tiny, persecuted body might not be able greatly to influence society in general, but the social implications of the Gospel were manifest.

II. TYPES OF INTERPRETATION

Out of the varying conditions in which the Church has continued we note in the main four principal interpretations which have held the field. These are: (i) *Chiliasm*, or Other-worldliness, (ii) *Ecclesiasticism*, or the Church outside the world, (iii) *Christendom*, or the Church and the world, (iv) *The Social Gospel*, or the Claim on the world.

(i) *Chiliasm, or Other-worldliness*.—Like Jewish apocalyptic this is marked by despair of the world. The present order is to be wound up and the Kingdom ushered in at one blow. Holders of this view tend to renounce responsibility for a society which is doomed. Tertullian the Montanist exclaims: 'I have seceded from the populace.' Similar ideas have recurred in times of crisis and of corruption in the Church, and they continue till the present time with varying renunciation of responsibility for current society. Seventh-day Adventists throw the weight of their teaching on anticipation of the end, but have developed considerable social services. Jehovah's Witnesses, on the other hand, denouncing every earthly government and organized church as belonging to Satan, have tended to repudiate every loyalty in this world. Some groups, from the safety of their own countries, denounce all Christians in Communist countries who find any kind of *modus vivendi* with these régimes. The strength of such movements is in their confidence that the end is in the hand of God; their weakness is in the failure to link expectation with responsible living now.

(ii) *Ecclesiasticism, or the Church outside the world*.—This less negative interpretation sees the Kingdom as manifesting itself in the life of the Church, the secular world, on which judgement of varying severity is passed, being the area from which souls must be saved. A teacher like Origen sees man's spiritual life as lived within the world we know, though it may sometimes be called even the Kingdom of Satan.

The development of this theme owes much to St. Augustine's book, *The City of God*, which identifies the Kingdom squarely

with the Church. In the later Dark and Middle Ages this found expression in Monastic and other Orders, yet these, though withdrawn from society, did in fact do much to conserve values of culture and civilization in a barbaric period.

This view continued with the Reformers, though they avoided the identification of the Kingdom with an obviously imperfect organization by making full use of the idea of an 'invisible Church'. In Lutheran circles a sharp division between 'the two Kingdoms' of God and of the world, each indeed under God but without responsibility laid on the Church for the order of society, took strong hold. Consequently a combination of personal piety with ruthlessness in public affairs could be readily accepted. In other circles a like phenomenon appeared.

The Hitler régime posed the greatest challenge to this view. In that period we find a teacher like Karl Heim openly querying the possibility of the dichotomy between private and political morality which had been widely held. Men like Niemoeller and Bonhoeffer felt compelled for Christian conscience' sake to intervene politically at risk of their lives. Today, though the dichotomy can still be found, it is noticeable that when, for instance, Billy Graham declined to comment on French atomic tests in the Sahara on the ground that this was a political question, his audiences in Ghana sharply declined.

(iii) *Christendom, or the Church and the world.*—The accession of Constantine introduced the optimistic view that the kingdoms of this world were becoming the Kingdom of God here and now. The picture reaches greater precision with Charlemagne, in the conception of 'Christendom' a society subject in all respects to the rule of God. It recalls an Old Testament idea of 'theocracy'. The precise relation between sacred and secular was the subject of considerable controversy. There were high moments for the Emperor, high moments also for the Papacy. But throughout there is a notable attempt to express an ideal of humanity as a single society, Church and State alike being Servants of God. Ideas like those of a 'just price' and attempts to curb the ferocity of war indicate the endeavour to discover a positive place for the kingdoms on earth.

After the Reformation such ideas continued, whether in the idea of the 'divine right of Kings' or in the 'godly magistrate' of Genevan teachings. They crossed the Atlantic where, in New England, men who had gone for their convictions believed it right to impose by iron law a standard of morality which they derived from Scripture. The idea continues in some lands with national recognition of the Church.

Attempts to impose godliness by the secular arm can have tragic results, for the corruption of power does not spare either the godly prince or the godly magistrate. The Spanish Inquisition, the rigidities of Geneva, Puritan New England teach the lesson in various ways. Yet the relation of Church and State had beneficial effects, too. The reign of Charlemagne meant enlightenment for his Empire, and Scotland owes its tradition of universal

education to the influence of the Reformed Church. 'Christendom' never becomes the Kingdom of God, yet the ideal was in many ways a noble one.

(iv) *The Social Gospel, or the Claim on the world.*—This interpretation reflects a quickened sense of duty among Christians to seek the improvement of social conditions, quite apart from whether or not the State is officially Christian. With the decline of the idea of 'Christendom' and the division between sacred and secular there was less sense of this responsibility in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the nineteenth century, however, men like Maurice and Kingsley pioneered a challenge to evil social conditions and answered protests by reminders of earlier Christian concern.

Common to this view is the conviction that the 'work of the Kingdom' is more than just the saving of individual souls. There are differences, however, in the extent to which this work is identified with the actual 'extension of the Kingdom'. Some have fully identified it, and this produces the language of 'building the Kingdom' familiar in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Others, less optimistic about human nature, have seen such work as rather the tokens of the work of the Kingdom, knowing that the Rule of God itself must be the work of God. These therefore know that there is not in improved social conditions any substitute for the life 'in Christ' and there is no substitute for the preaching of the Gospel. The social concern of the Christian, however, has proved of considerable influence even in non-Christian environments, even while men like Reinhold Niebuhr have helped Christians to recognize how far short their best efforts fall from establishing the Kingdom!

III. CONCLUSION

The fact that the early Church spoke less about the Kingdom than we find in the Gospels does not necessarily mean a falling away from true insights. We need to realize that what can be established through a human programme will be a human Kingdom and not God's. That social changes can usher in the Kingdom is an idea which founders on the fact that it is the actual person who has ultimate value, and each fresh generation must make its pilgrimage. One generation may hand on better or worse conditions than it inherited, but the living of a victorious personal life in society is the task of each generation. On this side of the *Parousia* it is vain to think of release from this task.

This is why the New Testament sees the token of the Kingdom's presence not in altered external conditions but in the *koinonia*, the new fellowship of love. We cannot with Augustine identify the Kingdom with the empirical Church, but it is within the Church that we are called to live the life of the Kingdom. Such a Church, however, cannot be self-regarding or self-sufficient. The laws of love compel us to a concern for our fellow-men in the context of society. Even where, as in India, Christians are a small

minority, the Christian citizen must bring to bear on social questions the insight and obedience which he learns from his Lord. Only, if our concern is deep enough, we shall know that this is no substitute for the proclaiming of the Gospel. The hope of the great missionary hymns is not based on a naïve optimism about human progress, it is rooted in the certainty that 'Jesus shall reign'. It is as the boundaries of the Church are extended and the Church increasingly conformed to His obedience, that even in this age a community grows in which men learn what it means to be citizens of a heavenly city, and are sustained and sent out to serve in the house of their pilgrimage.