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The Kingdom of Heaven in the New Testament.

WITH its synonym "the kingdom of God," the phrase "the kingdom of Heaven" meets us on the very threshold of the New Testament, where it is represented as being the burden of the message proclaimed both by John the Forerunner, and afterwards by Jesus Himself. It is thus given a prominence in the early preaching of our Lord which, according to the first three Gospels, it never fails to receive in all His subsequent ministry. It is, therefore, a valid conclusion from the Synoptic reports of the teaching of Jesus that the idea represented by this phrase is essential and fundamental to all that the Supreme Teacher taught concerning God and the soul. We can safely assume that it is the ruling conception of the Gospel He preached, the great theme of His ministry, vitally entering into the whole texture of the great revelation He has given to the world.

That being so, this subject is, undoubtedly, worthy of the earnest consideration of all true followers of Christ, although for nearly eighteen centuries the conflicting theologies and confessions of Christendom—in so far as they can be said to have made any real attempt to teach people religion—sought to direct the minds of their respective adherents more to what was usually thought to be the Gospel of Christ than to this great phrase that was so often upon the lips of Jesus. To-day, however, there is an awakened interest in the idea of the Kingdom of God, which, in all probability, is mainly one of the fruits of the "Back to Christ" movement of the last half century, though the beginnings of the resuscitation of the idea are to be traced much further back than that—even, in fact, to the German Pietists of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, "who loved to speak of work for the Kingdom of God, instead of for the Church or for Christianity." But the first outstanding thinker to deal earnestly with the idea was Kant, who may be considered as "the morning star" of this theological renaissance, whilst other writers like Kant's later contemporary, Schleiermacher, helped somewhat to keep the revived interest alive. It was Ritschl, however, who did most to maintain consistently this idea of the Kingdom of Heaven, by making it one of the two poles of his theological system—the other pole being the idea of redemption or the love

of God. And so thoroughly and widely has Ritschlianism permeated current theological thought that the idea of the Kingdom of God has come to assume a new prominence in recent theology, in which more than one sustained attempt has been made "to find in it the supreme and controlling notion of Christian dogmatics, as well as of Christian ethics." (Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible,* Vol. II., page 844.) Indeed, there are some rationalistic theologians in Germany who would go even further. They have a decided penchant for this phrase of Jesus, and hope that by giving all His utterances on this subject an eschatological interpretation they may be able to solve the very real problems created by His teaching and Personality. Accordingly, they hold that Jesus took over from contemporary Judaism not merely the phrase "the Kingdom of Heaven" itself, but also the crude ideas which most of the Jews generally associated with it. And thus Jesus is made the creature of His own age, confined within the most narrow limits of thought and outlook, and reduced to such a mean intellectual and spiritual level as to be unable either to originate a new idea, or to purify and give ethical content to an old one. He is merely a deluded visionary—for that is what their theory amounts to—whose thoughts have been "too well but not too wisely" steeped in the apocalyptic, and perhaps, too, pseudepigraphical, literature of His country and race; and so He dreams of a glorious coming Kingdom of Heaven which is to burst with dramatic and catastrophic suddenness upon "a wicked and adulterous generation"; of which Kingdom He Himself as "the Son of Man," is to be the sovereign Lord, whilst His faithful followers, who have left everything to become His disciples, are to share in His rulership and His triumph. In this belief of "a second coming" He died upon the Cross, but not without first having bequeathed the illusion to His friends and followers, all of whom expected Him to reappear within the life time of their own generation.

But, theologians, whether rationalistic or otherwise, are not the only people nowadays, to whom "the Kingdom of God" is of supreme and commanding importance. There are also social reformers and even political revolutionaries both in England and on the Continent, amongst whom this phrase of Jesus has received a popularity which has never been accorded to it in the Church itself—not even in the Church of the Apostles. Many of them are men who do not believe the deepest things concerning the Person and Work of our Lord as we find them stated in the New Testament, and yet with passionate eagerness they have adopted this phrase to express their highest social ideals; and whilst they utterly refuse to think of Christ as the Son of the Highest or the Saviour of the World, they, nevertheless, enthusiastically and

openly acclaim Him as the supreme social reformer and even as the greatest of political revolutionaries. And when it is remembered that these people believe in the democratization of religious as well as political, institutions and ideas—and when it is further remembered that this is an age of democracy in which "the captains and the kings depart"—it is certainly a remarkable fact that men have chosen such an intensely autocratic phrase to express their finest democratic ideals. Surely, it is an unconscious testimony to the influence of Jesus upon the life and thought of the world.

I.

That Jesus often spoke about "the Kingdom of Heaven" is, of course, unquestioned by any who accept the Gospels as trustworthy records of historic facts. Indeed, even so radical a critic as Schmiedel practically asserts that it was the main theme of the Master's preaching, in admitting that the Synoptic tradition had its roots in history. True, in the nine passages "not open to question" which Schmiedel selects from our first three Gospels, and calls the "foundation-pillars of a really scientific life of Jesus," the phrase "the Kingdom of Heaven" does not occur. Nevertheless, he goes on to say, after discussing his "foundation pillars," "We must, therefore, work upon the principle that together with the 'foundation-pillars,' and as a result of them, everything in the first three Gospels deserves belief, which would tend to establish Jesus' greatness, provided that it harmonises with the picture produced by the 'foundation-pillars,' and in other respects does not raise suspicion. And this gives us nothing less than pretty well the whole bulk of Jesus' teaching, in so far as its object is to explain in a purely religious and ethical way what God requires of man, and wherein man receives comfort and consolation from God" (*Jesus in Modern Criticism*, page 27).

We may safely assume, therefore—the most advanced New Testament criticism being on our side—that the Master did speak about "the Kingdom of Heaven." From the beginning to the end of His ministry—whether its duration be three years or only six months—Jesus constantly called men to repentance because of the imminence of that Kingdom and often likened it to common objects in the world of nature, or certain happenings in the realm of life. Indeed, many of our Lord's most characteristic parables —such as those, for example, brought together in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew—contain some reference to the origin, the development or the coming of the Kingdom, whilst many of His more direct and less picturesque sayings make definite statements

concerning this great theme of His teaching. Hence the phrase must have been continually upon the lips of Jesus. According to the Gospels, as we now have them, He used it something like a hundred and ten times—though, obviously He must have spoken it much more frequently in the course of His ministry—and that number is greatly increased if we remember the number of times the phrase "eternal life" occurs in the fourth Gospel, a phrase which is undoubtedly the Johannine equivalent of the Synoptic "Kingdom of Heaven." This latter fact is admitted even by Wendt, when he says; "Although in the discourses of the fourth Gospel, this title of the "Kingdom of God" occurs only in one place, yet in reality the whole contents of those discourses, their testimony to His Messiahship, and their exhortations to faith in Him, can be ranked under the general subject of the Kingdom of God and the two aspects under which He expounded it" (*The Teaching of Jesus*, Vol. I., page 174).

It is certain, therefore, as the foregoing facts amply prove—and has been pointed out, at the beginning,—that the idea of the Kingdom of Heaven is basic and essential to the whole scheme of Jesus' teaching, the main theme in His proclamation of the "Good news." And this position can be maintained in spite of the fact that Dr. Drummond, in his "Kerr Lectures," following Dr. Kidd, denies that the "Kingdom of Heaven" is the master-thought of Jesus, and asserts that it can only be made to appear so by using the phrase "in a very lax way and by fitting into it numerous ideas that have no cognate affinity with the idea of king or kingdom" (*Apostolic Teaching and Christ's Teaching*, page 183); for even this able lecturer practically admits, on a previous page (179) that the idea of the Kingdom was basic to the teaching of Jesus, in saying: "This phrase was constantly on the lips of Christ, particularly during the early section of His ministry, and in public utterance even to the end, though not in private colloquy with His disciples. It was used by Him as a summary for what He taught Himself, and what He commissioned His messengers to preach." Still, the fact that we hold the "Kingdom of Heaven" to be fundamental to Christ's presentation of His Gospel does not prevent us from agreeing with Harnack's contention that the teaching of Jesus may be summed up under other categories besides the traditional one He adopted. Even a casual reading of the Gospel narratives reveals that it might be set forth equally as well under the heading of "God the Father and the Infinite value of the human soul," or of "the higher righteousness and the command to love" (*What is Christianity?* page 51). Nevertheless, the point with which we are concerned is the one for which we have contended above—viz., that Jesus *did* adopt this traditional category "the Kingdom of Heaven" to

cover and express the content of the message He came to proclaim to the sons of men.

When, however, we turn from the Gospels to the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles we are amazed to discover that the idea of the Kingdom falls into the background while that of the Church emerges. Except in the Apocalypse—which of all the books of the New Testament, gives the Kingdom of God most prominence —there are very few references to this master-thought of Jesus in Apostolic literature, apart from those in the Synoptic Gospels, and some of these few have a somewhat modified meaning. In the whole range of the Pauline Epistles the Kingdom is named less than a dozen times, whilst it is mentioned only once by James, once by Peter, once by the writer to the Hebrews, and not at all in the three Epistles of John. This paucity of reference would, therefore, seem to imply that to the Apostles, after that Ascension day when they made their last enquiry concerning the restoration of the Kingdom and received Christ's pertinent answer, the "Church" became practically everything and the "Kingdom" practically nothing. True, as we shall see later, this change may have largely been more one of phraseology than of essential truth; true also, the Apostles may have conceived the Church as a means to the establishment of the Kingdom; yet there are not wanting indications, in Paul at least, that the Church itself was construed in the terms of a determinative and final idea.

And this fact, on first blush, not only evokes surprise, but has sometimes led men to declare that Apostolic Christianity, either totally failed rightly to interpret its Master or unjustifiably neglected His teaching on this theme; that, in any case, however the fact be accounted for, the Primitive Church woefully missed the essential element in its Founder's presentation of the Gospel. Even so brilliant a writer and so earnest a Christian as "Ian Maclaren" has not escaped the temptation to say this, ("With all respect to the great Apostle one may be allowed to express his regret that St. Paul had not said less about the Church and more about the Kingdom." *The Mind of the Master,* page 321), although, to say the least, it is a very perilous procedure for any one to imply that those who knew Jesus best failed to interpret Him correctly. For if the Apostle scarcely be right where doth the modern critic appear? Far better and nearer the mark is Dr. Stalker's contention (*The Ethic of Jesus,* page 44) that the "Kingdom of Heaven" was never intended to have a permanent place in the Christian scheme of things, although he apparently makes the suggestion as much about the idea enshrined in the phrase, as about the phrase itself. (*The Christology of Jesus,* page 164). In the latter case the suggestion is no doubt correct, as the facts of Apostolic literature clearly indicate, but it is surely

going too far to maintain that the essential truths expressed by the phrase were predoomed by the chief exponent of them to be thrown aside on to the scrap-heap of worn-out theological dogmas. For certainly that great idea of Jesus, involving, as it does, His demand for repentance, faith in Himself as the King, a righteousness inward and absolute—surely that idea contains the essence of the Gospel, although, nowadays following the example of the Apostles, we speak more often of the Church of Christ, the grace of God, the forgiveness of sins, and the life everlasting. True, the phrase the "Kingdom of Heaven" contains no reference to the death of Jesus and its soteriological significance, but even that thought is not altogether excluded when we remember that the Kingdom was to be established by the King. And His death was essential to Jesus' method of bringing in His Kingdom, although in preaching the "Gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven" very little could be done to teach even His own disciples the fact of His coming death and its vital connection with the spiritual needs and hopes of humanity—as the Gospel records amply prove. All that Jesus essentially meant to convey, therefore, by His use of "the Kingdom of Heaven," still finds a place in the theology of Christendom, although for many generations the phrase itself became well-nigh obsolete in the Christian Church.

(*To be continued.*)

JOHN PITTS.

DUNSTER, near the Bristol Channel, was evangelized about 1720 by James Sampson, of Tiverton, and a Baptist church was formed. It was ministered to by Spurrier, Bryant, Jackson, Jeffries. Then no further minister was forthcoming. The building was used also by a Presbyterian congregation, and the two bodies united, making a church of 80. Hall and Evans were not Baptist ministers. After the latter died in 1763, the cause ended.

MILBORNE PORT is in Somerset, four miles east of Sherborne in Dorset. The Presbyterian ejected in 1662 started a school and gathered a congregation, dying 1700. A subsequent minister was James Foster, from Hallet's academy at Exeter; he became Baptist, and was called to London, where he was famous. The new ministers were Samuel Fry and Thomas Bosher, both Baptists. The former was called to Horsleydown about 1738. The latter seems to have come from Beaminster, in Dorset, where a Seventh-day church is supposed to have been in 1710. He resigned Milborne Port in 1742, but was helping Loughwood as late as 1756, and was alive when Josiah Thompson made his notes. The church did not live much longer.