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The Way to Unity: Maurice's Exegesis for Society

F. D. Maurice (1805–72), widely read a century ago, was a hundred years in advance of his time. The ideas outlined in a series of sermons he preached in the chapel of Lincoln's Inn, London, at a time of national crisis and published, simply, as *The Lord's Prayer* (1848),[1] parallel similar ideas in a later commentary, *The Commandments considered as Instruments of National Reformation* (1866).[2] His interpretations of Scripture are of enduring value and, thanks to a growing desire for unity and understanding, we have arrived at the moment for turning them to account as his generation could not. We welcome their revival and, hopefully, we shall use them in developing our own nation.

We are striving for unity today, but do we know what we mean by the term? Though our country has enjoyed a century of nationhood, have we as Canadians a clear concept of a nation? Do we really know what we mean by 'the Church?' And do we in our day appreciate the connection existing between church and nation? To these questions Maurice gave serious attention, and adequate answers to all of them may be found in his voluminous writings. As our desire for unity grows we are constrained to nibble at some of them: in order to stimulate interest in our present ecumenical movement his letters on unity, for example, have been selected from his son's now scarce *Life of F. D. Maurice* (2 vols., 1884)[3] and reprinted in a separate volume, *Towards the Recovery of Unity* (1964).[4]

A comparison of Maurice's two commentaries – that on the Lord's Prayer, and that written eighteen years later on the Commandments – illustrates his determination, not only to interpret the Bible at face value, but also to explain it consistently in terms of the kingdom described in it. In both commentaries Maurice indicates a commonplace overlooked by most of us, that these formularies (the Commandments and the Prayer) presume a kingdom already in existence – a kingdom, moreover, presided over by a king.[5] The Command-

1. *The Lord's Prayer* (1848). Published in one volume with *The Prayer Book* (London: Macmillan, 1880).

2. *The Commandments considered as Instruments of National Reformation* (1866).

3. *The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice*, edited by Colonel Frederick Maurice, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1884).

4. Edited from a selection of Maurice's Letters with an Introduction by John F. Porter and William J. Wolf (New York: Seabury Press, 1964).

5. See F. D. Maurice, *The Kingdom of Christ*, new edition based on the second edition of 1842, edited by Alec R. Vidler (London: SCM Press, 1958), II, p. 188; and compare each versicle of the Prayer with its corresponding Commandment. See also Hugh MacMillan's article, 'The Lord's Prayer' in *Bible Reader's Aids, Authorized Version* (Toronto: Winston), p. 24.

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ments are directives to guide us in the sustenance of that kingdom, and the comparison shows that, when translated into prayer, the Commandments become the Lord's Prayer, a model on which men may frame their petitions to God. Knowing the Father's commands, they can but ask for help to obey them and to do their part in fostering the earthly polity of the kingdom.

Ideally, this earthly polity is, in Maurice's view, none other than a national commonwealth. Each nation is an image of the kingdom of heaven, and to the extent that each is brought into focus with its archetypal reality, to that extent may it attain a complete and harmonious life for its citizens. The Ten Commandments of the Old Testament and the Lord's Prayer of the New provide a complementary foundation upon which alone all true and lasting polity may be reared and upheld.

'I am the Lord thy God' and 'Our Father' establish the source of man's being, leading his mind and heart away from himself to that which can sustain and direct him. All commandments, all prayers, begin and end with 'Our Father.' Rising like incense to 'I am' the invocation presupposes the existence of a bond between creature and Creator, and Maurice thus reminds us of the covenant between God and man.

'Who art in heaven' affirms the Invisible Presence and indicates the impotence of 'any graven image' to replace Him. 'Who art in heaven' teaches man, therefore, to 'hallow the Name' that he may not by word or deed 'take it in vain.' That the kingdom may come, he prays that God's 'will may be done in earth as it is in heaven,' that he may thus be helped to do 'no murder,' and 'no adultery,' neither to 'steal' nor bear 'false witness,' nor to 'covet.' Only then, with the Father's will supplanting his own, may the suppliant ask for 'bread,' for 'forgiveness,' for 'deliverance from temptation' and 'from evil.' Only after this expression of trust in the Father may the petitioner for all to the Father of all rise in gratitude. With thanksgiving he hymns 'Thine is the Kingdom' now.

'Thy Kingdom come' is the petition corresponding to the fourth and fifth Commandments together, both of which illustrate the meaning of the kingdom. 'Remember the Sabbath Day' and 'Honour thy father and thy mother' in terms, both of law and of petition, form the ground of Maurice's social philosophy. The fourth Commandment ('Remember the Sabbath day') affirms order in the spiritual kingdom, while the fifth ('Honour thy father and thy mother') as an image of the fourth, is concerned with earthly relationships; both Commandments re-affirm the bond between creature and Creator, while the fifth Commandment is completed by a conditional promise for 'long life' in the land God has given.[6]

Both Commandments begin, ideally, with God as a Father. Both reflect human action on earth as the image of that in heaven. Reflecting Old Testament authority, both too, imply the spirit of the New in the Father's Son who, having once assumed human form, addresses himself to each man and each nation. The Son of God is the ideal man, the 'Elder Brother' of both, and, in

6. *The Commandments*, pp. 82–3.

the attempt to follow him, both individual and aggregate man emulate the spirit of the prayer in trying to be obedient to the Commandments.[7]

In Maurice's view church and nation together constitute the earthly aspect of the kingdom. As the New Testament is a fulfilment of the Old, so the church complements the nation. As representatives of nation and church respectively, monarch and priest are the national witnesses for the Father, the Trinitarian Unity, and therefore – on the earthly level – for the human family with which Maurice saw an analogy with the Trinity in whose name members (of a Christian nation) are baptized. Church and nation together are the image of the kingdom as they complementarily testify to the establishment on earth of a 'universal communion' which the peculiarities of individuals, families, and nations can neither alter nor break.

Yet church and nation remain distinct. The church witnesses to the universal love of God 'gathered up in a Person,' while the nation wields the sword of justice in maintaining law and order. In heralding the kingdom, the church promotes general *well-being*, whereas the nation as magistrate fosters *well-doing*.[8] The individual, who desires personal distinction and private property, is protected by the nation whereas the social body, seeking one commonweal, is a brotherhood united in the church. Though working together for a coherent polity, church and nation remain distinct bodies acting through complementary means for a common end.

Maurice contrasted the church with the world. In the world there is competition and rivalry, whereas friendly association characterisizes the church. Though worldly interests may encroach upon the church, and though the church is in the world, she is not of it. The church represents 'the true constitution of man as man' who is 'a child of God, an heir of heaven' while Maurice's world is 'a miserable, accursed, rebellious order' opposing the Church. In his sense, the world is an edifice of 'self-will, choice, taste, opinion,' setting up human gods, sometimes within the church herself.

In preaching the kingdom Maurice announced that, in his view, the Church of England was in his day the 'only firm consistent witness' for the universal church. As a 'brotherhood of many children under one Father' the English church, for all her indifference and vanity, had neither fallen to mere statecraft nor degenerated to the cult of personality. She had never quite severed herself from her spiritual source and, despite her 'Babylonian attire,' had stood firm on 'the constitution of things.'[9] But she was lamentably unsocial; she was woefully unmindful of the *well-being* of her children.

7. The above paragraphs attempt to illustrate, not only the consistent parallelism in Maurice's thinking, but his cardinal belief in God's Fatherhood of the human family. See *The Commandments*, pp. 50–86; *The Prayer Book and Lord's Prayer*, pp. 361, 387; and *The Kingdom of Christ*, ii, 234. Maurice's *Tracts on Christian Socialism* (1850), vii, 6: 'Has not the spirit of the shop and the counting-house virtually re-modelled the Gospel which we preach?,' succinctly identifies the inversion of modern thougth.

8. F. D. Maurice, *Patriarchs and Lawgivers of The Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1855), pp. 267–8.

9. *The Life of Maurice*, i, 166, ii, 8; *The Kingdom of Christ*, ii, 243–4.

Maurice preached the kingdom regularly, for the reformation of society had necessarily to begin with reform in the church. But he also descended from the pulpit into the arena of practical action: he became the advisory head of the Christian Socialist movement. As we have seen, for Maurice, Christianity was nothing if not social in spirit. The Christian Socialists adopted his social philosophy and determined to 'Christianize' the socialism just then coming to England from France – a task to be accomplished, they felt, by 'socializing' the cold Christianity of their day.[10] England must be wakened once more to warmth and love of Christ's own teaching.

In his first tract on Christian Socialism, Maurice replaced the philosophical *relationships* with *co-operation.* Since greed and competition had divided man from man and class from class, he wished to establish co-operation among them and thus to generate friendly feelings, especially among members of the working class. Thus were workers to be brought into co-operative working associations and, in this way, the spirit of brotherly love would grow in the nation. Maurice conceived this task, by whatever names it might be called, to be the first duty of the Church: *well-being* among citizens must come before *well-doing* could be encouraged.

Though ours purports to be a classless society, it is nevertheless divided by the same competition and greed that separated men of all classes in Maurice's day. The same mistrust makes human *relationships* today as strained as they were then. But the desire for unity is strong among us, and brotherly love is not extinct. It must be cultivated in fertile soil if genuine unity is to take root and grow.

Even as Maurice was delivering his sermons on the Lord's Prayer, Chartism, rising to fever-pitch among the working classes, menaced national peace. Any active sympathy with them was generally regarded as subversive of law and order. Even clergymen driven by Christian motives and conscience to help them were regarded with suspicion. Maurice and his followers, greatly misunderstood, were often identified with the more radical element in Chartism. Maurice, however, staunchly affirmed the basic principles of the kingdom. He opposed selfishness and greed in all classes, preaching co-operation and brotherly love, and promoting both in practical ways. 'Our Father,' he insisted, meant the Father of every man, rich or poor, and all members of the nation, whether high or low, must return to their Father.

Maurice's activities on behalf of uneducated labourers, however, were never intended to confer upon them an authority which they were incapable of using. Maurice, in fact, disapproved of democracy. Of that true democratic spirit assisting each citizen to realize his own stature, he quite approved. But in recognizing the earthly kingdom as an image of the heavenly, Maurice accepted the concept of hierarchical government as a principle. For him, monarchy, lords, and commons were all elements as necessary for the citizens as the cultivation of their feeling of *well-being*; and only by working in partnership might church and nation nurture an organic Christian society.

10. *The Life of Maurice,* II, 35.

A failure to maintain such an order, Maurice insisted, must leave society to fall inevitably under the rule of 'a most accursed priestcraft,' or to degenerate into a 'military despotism.' In either case, he said, every man in the nation would be a mere serf – 'morally, politically, physically;' and were he with us today he would still take his stand, we may be sure, on the side of wisdom and order against self-interest, superstition, and brute-force.[11]

Maurice's teaching may be summed up in his own words: 'God's Absolute Fatherly Love ... is the ground of all fellowship among men and angels' and, 'Love meets the desires and intuitions ... scattered throughout all the religions of the world.'[12] In this year of 'Our Father,' 1970, as we begin a second century of Canadian nationhood, we can do no better than return to the Book of Man, which is writ large with the way to unity and, as Maurice indicates, is inescapably persistent in that way.

11. *The Life of Maurice*, II, 129.

12. Maurice, *The Eucharist* (1857), p. 15; *Patriarchs and Lawgivers*, pp. 262–4; *The Kingdom of Christ*, II, 60–2, 74; *The Life of Maurice*, II, 394, 595; *Tracts on Christian Socialism* (1850), I, 10, II, 6–7.