

THE IDEA OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

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The closing address at the first annual meeting of the GA of U&FC Churches held in Manchester, April, 1929
Lindsey Press, London.

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To proclaim the Kingdom of God was the main purpose of Jesus, and the thought of that was central in his mind. Whatever he meant by it, he cared more to speak of that than anything else. If you took away from the Gospels all direct and indirect reference to the Kingdom of God, the remainder would be hardly intelligible. The thought of it lies behind all his teaching; and the desire to make that thought effective in the lives of men was the supreme motive in his ministry. I place besides this fact another, no less striking when it is carefully observed, viz., that what to Jesus was of such supreme importance, has remained since his day very much as he left it. No attempt has ever been made, on the part of Christendom as a whole or those who were responsible for the official acts and declarations of the Church, to give reality to the idea of the Kingdom of God as Jesus meant it. It has been honoured in word, being enshrined in the Lord's Prayer; it has been ignored in substance. And for all real effect which it has had on the historical development of Christianity, it might never have been proclaimed at all.

[2] From the time when the first messengers of the new religion went forth on their errand, they preached "Jesus and the resurrection"; they did not preach what he preached. And what gradually came into being, as the result of their labours, was the Christian Church; it was not the Kingdom of God - the Christian Church, as a society of those who "believed on their Lord Jesus Christ," and interpreted their belief, as time went on, in terms of doctrinal propositions about him rather than in efforts themselves to do the things that he said. The Christian Church never was the same as the Kingdom of God, either in fact or intention; and the Christian Church has held the field, for good and for evil, since the days of the Apostles, with the result that the Kingdom of God has never had a real chance of being developed into what Jesus meant it to be, the supreme fact of the religious life, individual and collective.

There are some who would have us believe that Jesus only spoke to his own age, and that his words have no application to the problems of later times, let alone those of the present day. As if the effect of the most powerful spiritual influence which has ever made itself felt in history were exhausted in its first effort, having done scarcely anything of what it was presumably intended to do! It may be true that the teaching of Jesus was to some extent bound up with ideas, apocalyptic [3] and other, which were valid only for his age. But it is also true that much of his teaching, and that moreover upon which he himself laid most stress, is quite independent of such local and temporary ideas, and not only can but most certainly does appeal to the minds of men and women in our own day. It is possible that when Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God, he did occasionally use the terms of the apocalyptic hopes and visions of his time; though for my own part I believe these counted for very little with him. But that which lay at the centre of his thought of the Kingdom of God was not apocalyptic at all, and not limited to any age or any country.

What Jesus chiefly intended by the Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of Heaven, which means precisely the same thing) was the *rule of God in the heart*. Not primarily a Kingdom in the sense of extended territory or a group of subjects, but the sovereignty of God consciously owned in the mind and conscience of man - every man individually, if so it may be, and not men collectively, except as individuals grouped together. This is the root meaning of the idea of the Kingdom of God, from which all the other meanings are derived. It was so for Jesus, as it was in the current Jewish teaching of his time, and it is this which had its roots in the Old Testament. But no one other than Jesus,

before or since, laid such exclusive stress upon the idea [4] of the Kingdom of God, as no one other than he saw so deeply into the far-reaching implications of that idea, none perceived so clearly its immense spiritual possibilities.

To own the rule, Kingship, sovereignty of God in the heart meant not only to obey him but to love him. When the Jew read in his ancient scripture, and repeated the words daily in his prayers, "thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and strength," that was what the Kingdom of God meant to him; and that explains why Jesus gave those same words when asked what was the greatest commandment. It was greatest just because it summed up the idea of the Kingdom of God; it expressed the real relation of man to God, a relation which is fundamentally the same (though the words be different), as expressed in the terms the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. These are practically interchangeable, being three connected aspects of the one fundamental thought.

It was the primary object of Jesus, in his ministry, to make men realize that they actually did stand in such relation to God, and that they could, and that they ought to, be such as that relation implied, both towards God and towards their fellow men. That is the essence of the Gospel, as Jesus preached it. Very simple, very easy to understand, but making immense demands upon whoso would live up to it. To realize *that*, in heart and [5] soul and life, was salvation; the only salvation there is or ever was.

If anyone did so realize his relation to God, and set himself to order his life accordingly, then for him the Kingdom of God as a present reality. It had come. Until he did so, it was still in the future, something yet to be attained. And if not one man only, but several, had got to the stage at which they owned the Kingship of God, then they could be thought of as a group or society, bound together by their love and allegiance to God, their Father in heaven. This is where the collective meaning of the Kingdom of God begins to appear, and this explains why the Kingdom of God is most often understood as the ideal state of humanity, the perfect order of social life. This is the completion of what is begun in the individual; one aspect of the

*"far off divine event
To which the whole creation moves."*

For Jesus, this end could only be reached by successive and gradual bringing in of all men under the sway of the one comprehensive idea, or rather under the sway of the one God, owned and obeyed, trusted and loved. The apocalyptic vision of a sudden reversal of ordinary conditions of life by a divine catastrophe, was the fruit of human impatience desiring to cut short the long and difficult road which led to the desired end; and, [6] whether or not Jesus ever let himself be distracted by such vain dreams of speedy attainments, these do not represent what lay deepest in his thought or what in it has most permanent value and power. Of course he could see, as anyone can, that the full realization of what he meant by the Kingdom of God, would imply the perfect life of mankind on earth, both individually and collectively. But for him the only way to reach that end was by awakening each man individually to his responsibilities; and the conscious recognition of the Kingdom of God in regard to himself. And to do this was what he made the one supreme purpose of his ministry. To do this as he had done it, was presumably, what he hoped that those would continue to do whom he had chosen and trained, and taught whatever they could learn by association with himself.

Whether his immediate followers ever clearly understood what he had done and why he had done it is matter of conjecture only. What is certain is that the society of his disciples which began to take shape as the Christian Church, did not carry on what he had begun, but devoted their energies to something quite different.

The small group of Christians gathered together by the first preachers of the Gospel, notably Paul, were gradually linked together as a society of those who believed in Christ; and the larger the society became, [7] the more definitely it took the form of an institution having conditions of membership, regulations for its guidance and officers for its management. From this small beginning it grew into the great Church whose varied history dominates the centuries through the Middle Ages, and down to our own time. Whether as the one undivided Church or as the multitude of minor churches, which came into being under Protestant influence, organized Christianity retained one unchanging characteristic - the condition of membership was doctrinal conformity, acceptance of what the church declared to be the true faith, that which its members must believe. This is not to say that the whole of Christian energy was expended on theological definition and enforcement - as by councils, papal decrees, the Inquisition and the like, the one essential which was before everything else was the doctrinal bond of union, the creed (as formulated by one particular church), that without which the Church as an institution could not be held together. To rebel against that was to be a heretic; and to be a heretic was to be one who endangered not only his own eternal welfare but that of all who might come under his influence. Hence persecution. The Church never persecuted sinners and evil livers as [8] such. She made efforts to reform them, and generally to raise the standard of morals; but she never regarded the fact of vice and corruption as fatal to her existence as a Church. But to touch the articles of belief, by which alone her members were held together, was to undermine the very foundation on which her whole structure was built. And it is true, in substance, that *the whole Church Idea, as historically defined, implies that doctrinal conformity is put in the first place, above everything else, to be kept fast hold of whatever else may be endangered or let go.*

The Church Idea has been the ruling conception in Christian history since the days of the Apostles till our own. It has been the means of accomplishing immense good and immense evil, towards mankind. All this can be read in the history books, and I make no attempt to summarize it here.

My point at present is something totally different from the Idea of the Kingdom of God; and that while the Church held the field, there was no room for the Kingdom. Whether it had to be so, I do not know. That in fact it has been so, is not open to question. I mean, that through the Ages, Christianity found its expression through the Idea of the Church and not through the Idea of the Kingdom.

If I am right, then the facts of which I have thus [9] briefly reminded you will throw much light upon the situation in regard to religion at the present day.

What is the meaning of the very apparent decline in the influence of organized religion?

We see a widespread indifference to and neglect of religion under the forms in which it has hitherto been presented. We see doctrinal bonds being loosened or broken, and the authority of the churches, as institutions competent to teach and clearly knowing their own mind, disregarded, and their power to control and cure the evils of life by spiritual means weakened if not destroyed. I need not dwell on the confusion and disorder which prevails everywhere in the modern world at all events in the region of it which has hitherto been dominated by the Church Idea. We all can see it, and have seen it for a long time and have wondered not without anxiety what is to be the way out of it - if there be a way.

I believe, and have long believed, that what we are witnessing is *the breaking down and passing away of the Church Idea* - in the sense in which I have used that term. We are standing at one of the great turning points in history; we are beholding a change in the direction of the great stream of history which has flowed down through the centuries under the Christian name. We are engaged in no transient change, to be accomplished in a few years, no controversy whose clamour will die away into silence [10] as new sounds are heard; we are involved in one of the mightiest movements which the human race has ever made, one of the great forward steps which it has taken in its onward and

upward march. It is at last, after almost nineteen centuries, moving away from the Church Idea and all that is implied therein; and it is moving forward towards the Idea of the Kingdom of God.

The confusion over the whole field of religion which we see, and from whose effects all Christians suffer, is the necessary accompaniment of so profound a change, and Christendom will have to live through it as well as it can, and endure to the end. But the end of the painful process will be as I read the signs of the times, that the Idea of the Kingdom of God will be put in the place of the Church Idea which is now dying or dead. The far-reaching and profound thought which filled the mind of Jesus will at long last come to its own, and take the place, as the means of uplifting humanity, which he saw that it could fill. He lived for it and died for it; and all the ages since his death have seemed to prove that for his own supreme ideal he lived and died in vain. And now it is beginning to be clearly seen that his great word was not dead but sleeping. In our time it is beginning to resound once more, and to awaken echoes where for so long there was silence or only the tones of another and less divine voice.

[11] Is it not so? Is there not, in much of the religious thinking and teaching of the present day, an insistence on the need to get back to Jesus and to apply his great ideas to the problems of our time? Is not this far more evident than it was fifty years ago? And is there not far less willingness to dwell on the old doctrinal questions, the points of difference? Is it not true that the old teaching associated with the plan of Salvation is being to a large extent left on one side, while yet it was once deemed to be of supreme importance? These things are plain to be seen; and they are to me the sure signs of the coming into view of the Idea of the Kingdom of God, the process by which it is entering in and taking possession of the mind of Christendom. And, if that is so, then (with a new application of ancient words): - "The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed." And again: - "If that which is passing away was with glory much more that which remaineth is with glory."

Great and far-reaching is the change which, as I believe, is coming to pass, going on before our eyes, and in which we as Christians have our share. But the accomplishment of it is not to be looked for in any apocalyptic reversal of the old order, and its replacement by the new in some sudden divine act. The change will surely be, as always, by the growing of the new out [12] of the old. Those who will be living under the new order, when the Idea of the Kingdom of God has prevailed, will be men and women such as they were while the Church Idea was still in its last decline. The difference, and it will be a vast difference, will be felt in their relation to one another. For the Idea of the Kingdom of God is universal and all-inclusive in a way which was never possible, nor even contemplated or desired, under the Church Idea. The Kingdom of God, as the rule of God in the heart, the love and service of him, and the consequent love and service of all men as children of the one Father, *that* is not limited by any doctrinal definitions. No one but a Christian ever did, or ever could, work for the Church. But all can work for the Kingdom of God, not Christians only but all who consciously own God, whether Christian or Jew, Mohammedan or Brahmin, or any other of those to whom God has revealed himself "by diverse portions and in diverse manners."

And none of these need cease to think of God and serve him in such ways as have been hallowed to them in the experience of their race, or their immediate associates. Not even the doctrinal formulae of the older time would need to be abandoned, if it were desired to retain them. But - and this is the crucial factor in the change from the Church Idea to the Kingdom Idea - the doctrinal definitions will not, and cannot, be put in the first place as the essential, the one supremely important consideration. They will have to be made a wholly secondary matter, of such importance only as any and every thoughtful person may assign to them in his own mind. It will be an application of the words of Jesus which his professed followers have not been ready to make: - "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you" - if indeed they be any longer desirable.

Under the Kingdom of God there will no longer be those barriers which have divided Christians from one another, which have set heretic apart from the orthodox, the Christian against the Jew; there will no longer be the assurance which presumes to read the mind of God and to pronounce his judgements on the hearts of his children. And all the energy which is, by sectarian distinctions and rivalries and jealousies, kept back from its true function, will be set free for the service of God and man by those who own and feel themselves to be one with each other as “sons of the Kingdom.”

Is not such service that which the present age is most intent upon? When did Social Service ever hold such a place in human thought, sound so loud a call to human will and conscience as it does today? And what is that but the challenge of the Idea of the Kingdom of God?

[14] What are all the multitude of separate efforts - social, industrial, economic, political - towards the betterment of human life, but so many strivings towards the Idea which is embodied in the thought of the Kingdom of God? That, in its essence, is a purely religious idea; and these various efforts made in our time are not felt by all those who take part in them, to be religious; some would even dissociate them from religion altogether. Yet is it not true that the Idea of the Kingdom of God *on Earth* as was always the meaning of the term, is the one vast conception which includes them all, from the smallest individual effort up to the League of Nations?

These are doubtless the strivings of our own day, and they may change their form and scope with the passing of the years, as men learn better methods and state their objects in other words. But the whole vast movement, of which these are the visible signs, is not a matter of a few years nor one that concerns only a few people, or even the whole body of Christians. We are, I believe, seeing the end of an order of things, which in one essential feature has endured since the Christian Church was founded; we see the beginning, the rising dawn of a new order, whose meaning and whose form we can scarcely do more than guess at. Whether any of us will live to see how that rising dawn breaks into full day, no one can tell. And it is not with such fulfilment of our hopes that we are concerned. It is enough if we have such a hope, such a faith in the eternal God, that we can look out over the troubled times in which we are living, and see that they are not bearing to destruction the truths and realities by which we have lived; that God is leading mankind in paths that they know not, where the way is hard to tread and the sky above is dim, but that the way leads onward to light.

To us of this fellowship, the ideas on which I have been dwelling have long been familiar. The Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, the Kingdom of God, are the terms which we most readily say what religion means to us. They are no private possession of our own. They are for all the world and for every man and woman and child on earth, as Jesus meant them to be. But to us they mean the deepest and truest that there is in religion.

And we, like all other Christians, stand at this time confronting a great and solemn vision of things to come; we, like all other Christians, are hearing the call to go forward into a new realm of the spiritual life. We have, in these latest days, girded ourselves and closed up our ranks for a braver and stronger and more faithful effort in the service of God and man. We take our place alongside of all who are listening to the voice that spoke in Galilee proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was at hand. On us, as on all who [16] hear that voice, is laid the charge to do our part, to *be* what children of God should be, and so to bring nearer the time when “the Kingdoms of this world shall become the Kingdom of our God.”