

The Invisible Cloud of Witnesses

by Art Katz

The invisible cloud of witnesses, the church triumphant, exerts influence on the church militant, and the church and Israel are one inseparable community, with Jesus Christ as their common head.

Duration: 31:07

Scripture: Matthew 5:14, Matthew 22:37-39, Acts 1:8, Romans 11:17-18, Romans 11:25-26, Ephesians 2:12-13, Hebrews 12:1

Topics: "Cloud of Witnesses"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on the state of the world in the 20th century, expressing deep pessimism about mankind's ability to solve its problems. He emphasizes the need for the recognition of God as the only hope for humanity. The speaker also shares theological reflections on the concept of the invisible cloud of witnesses, drawing inspiration from theologian Karl Barth. He recounts a powerful experience at a conference where miracles were happening, including the healing of a young girl with paralyzed legs. The speaker concludes by highlighting the continued impact of those who have come before us, suggesting that their departure only marks the beginning of their influence on future generations.

Transcript

Just a little appetizer. I wonder if you're interested to hear a little theological reflection that probably would just go over the heads of many about the invisible cloud of witnesses. Just to give you an idea of how a theologian reflects.

I was impressed with this by Karl Barth. So don't get flustered if you don't follow it, or it sounds strange, but try and flow and see how this man ponders and reflects and sees applications that many do not ordinarily consider. If it does speak to your spirit, it could be a real illumination, a real opening of something of a productive kind.

And it has to do with the invisible cloud of witnesses, which Karl Barth sees in continuum with the church. He talks about the church militant and the church triumphant. The church triumphant are those who have already passed on and the church militant is the church presently in the earth.

But he sees them both as one church. And those that have gone on before us are, of course, connected with the conclusion of the church in the earth, but they contribute to it. So let me just read something of

this.

That the other church already belongs today to the sphere of completion, but the dead, no less than the living, have a part in the communion of the saints. Isn't that a remarkable thing? Talk about seeing by the eye of the spirit. Someone prayed this morning about being liberated from our categories, bringing the eternal perspective to bear now.

That's exactly what he's doing. He's going through conventional categories, and he's seeing that the church that has passed on, that though it is invisible, it's present and belongs to the communion of the saints. It is not only the living who speak and act, but their predecessors.

Their words, their works, their history does not end with their departure, but on their departure often only then enters its decisive stage among their successors. You know who I gave this to? A lady on her deathbed. A precious intercessor to encourage her and to show her that if the Lord would be pleased to take her, it's not the end of her ministry, but the release of her ministry into yet another phase of activity, perhaps yet even more significant than when she was among the living, so to speak.

Let me read that again. It's not only the living who speak and act, but their predecessors, those who have come before, their words and works, their history, which does not end with their departure, but on their departure, often only then enters its decisive stage among their successors. That's when you can say, death, where is your victory? And grave, where is your sting? Oh boy, the devil got away and he took one of God's choice saints, or how is it that this one was taken so early? It may well be it's not a sense of loss, but a sense of gain for the church, because upon the taking and coming into the realm of the things that are invisible, that there is an influence exerted from that place to those that are living and in the earth that is more profound than what they would have exerted had they remained living.

Can you sense that? They stand in an indissoluble relationship with the present, whether we are aware of it or not. This didn't wait for us to come to the awareness in order to be vital. It's been vital all along, but it's good to be aware of things as God establishes them.

The triumphant church is with Christ, who is the head of the body. It takes part in the glory, which is still hidden from the church in the earth, because it is with him and in the midst of it. The church that has passed on, that is part of that invisible cloud, is with the Lord in glory.

They are already in the place that is beyond time. They are already in the eternal future. They are already tasting of the age to come.

If they are already in the place of glory, what kind of influence then do they exert for us who are yet locked in time and place? They bring something of the aura and the sense of that future thing presently to bear as influence upon us. It's like someone who has already crossed the finish line and now encouraging those who are struggling to make it to come through because they know the glory and the joy that awaits the triumph of finishing. You see what I mean? And how is it that we are connected with them? Because we have a living head.

The one who is our head is also theirs. And that this influence that they exert, which is in an invisible realm and we hardly know how to assess it, is something actively and not merely passive. And it impels those that are yet in the earth toward its completion.

This is, what do you call this? This is theological contemplation of what does the invisible cloud of witness mean. And very little is said about it. In fact, other than that reference in Hebrews, I don't know of another place where they are referred to.

But that's enough to suggest that there's a realm there that is real. And this is theological reflection on that little bit given in scripture about what it might mean, that that presence impels towards completion those that are yet in the earth. This means that a saint who is taken is not lost to the purposes of God, but rather continues from another sphere to be engaged in his purposes, even or at least as significantly as before.

That means the devil can't win. That means that there's nothing lost to God. That what is removed from the earth is merely just brought into another realm of activity affecting what goes on in the earth, perhaps even more profoundly from that place than it did before.

So the enemy cannot win, and even death, where the Lord allows it, is employed strategically in his purpose and glory. So through the triumphant church that has already gone before us, the church that's in the earth, the militant church, has its spearhead in the sphere of completion. This invisible cloud is already in the realm of eternal glory.

They're in the place beyond time, and they bring something of that aura and that sense. They are a spearhead of it to the church that's in the earth, moving it toward that same conclusion. Therefore the church which was and the church which is are very concretely one church, all live unto him, not only on that side but on this, not only on this side but on that.

And because they all live unto him, they are one community. Isn't this a remarkable way of seeing? And all of that is a preparation now for a shifting of gears to introduce the subject of Israel. For the same reason, the people of Israel in its whole history and the Christian church are two forms and aspects of one inseparable community.

First he talks about the invisible cloud of witnesses, the church triumphant, being related to the church militant in the earth as one community, and then he shifts gears and says, if that's true of that, then it's also true that Israel and the church are in God's sight, one community, two forms and aspects but one inseparable community in which Jesus Christ has his earthly historical form of existence by which he is attested to the whole world, by which the whole world is summoned to faith in him. Just take that last phrase, by which the whole world is summoned to faith in him. In other words, until there's a consciousness that the church is one community with Israel and Israel is conscious of its connection with the church, that the world cannot be summoned rightly to faith in him, that there's a release of the reality of himself in a fullness and a power that comes when this inseparable community recognizes itself as being the same community and joined to the same head.

For the one it's the Messiah to come, for the other it's the present Lord, but it's the same head. See what joins the two as one community? The same thing that joins the invisible cloud of witnesses with the church and the earth, one head. The Lord stands like the pivot and the joining of the things invisible and the things present, of the nation Israel that does not yet recognize him and the church who does.

But whether it's recognized by man or not, the truth and the reality of it still prevail. But when the recognition comes, there could be something of the release of the power that summons the world to faith in him. He himself is the one person, the crucified Messiah of Israel, who as such is the secret Lord of the church, the risen Lord, and as such also is the Messiah of Israel.

So on the one hand there is the promise, on the other it's fulfillment. In its form as Israel, the community is still identified with the nation, the commonwealth of Israel. Does the church no longer know the beginning? Does Israel not know of its consummation? I'm not doing justice to this, but here's the inseparable community that does not recognize itself belonging to each other.

What is the church but those who were far off, without hope in the world and without God, who have been brought nigh by the blood of the Messiah into the commonwealth of Israel? Israel does not recognize the church as being that, and the church itself does not see itself as being that. And that's why there's been a sense of independence and separation of these two entities, the church and Israel, that is contrary to the way that God himself sees them. So he's raising the question, does the church no longer know the beginning? Does it not know what it's derived from and what it's related to and what it has been brought into? And then the question is to Israel, does Israel not know of its consummation? Does it not know that this church is something given by God to bring it to a place of God's intention? Not that it has been fulfilled, but it is the one history.

It is the bow of the one covenant which stretches over the whole. It is therefore essential to the church from the very beginning, and it always will be, to represent this unity in itself and to exist in it. I wrote consciously, the church needs to see the identity with Israel in a way that has not recognized it.

Because it has been competitive and even a deterrent to Israel doesn't recognize its connectedness and when it's most arrogant and conceited, it sees itself even as Israel's replacement. For only the church that sees itself rightly as related to Israel can attest to the whole world and summon faith in Him. He's always bringing us back to what is the practical consequence of being rightly related to Israel as God would see it.

I wrote some remarks in here myself. Has the church in Germany seen that? Still see that and affirm that? It would revolutionize its whole perception of itself, radicalize its message and its witness, its power and its glory. Is it not for the want of this that we languish and grope for panaceas and fads and gimmicks because we sense that something is wanting and something is lacking? To deny this unity would be to deny Jesus Christ Himself as the attestation of the one work and the one revelation of the one God.

And hasn't the church in fact done this? Isn't the church fragmented because it has not seen its connection with Israel and therefore it has its view of God and its view of itself is fragmented also. It's not seen the unity that God intends. All of this came out of a discussion of the unity between the invisible church and the present church.

And it's the same principle. It's an issue of seeing. So this is theological reflection that I think is really stimulating.

And where the church has taken Romans 9 through 11 seriously, it has not been able to escape or explain away the fact that its unity in this sense is compromised by the existence of a Judaism which does not believe in Jesus Christ. More than anything else, this makes its own existence problematical. The existence of the synagogue side by side with the church is an ontological impossibility.

Sorry, this is getting fancy. It's a contradiction in terms. If these are unities that God intended, then the very existence of a synagogue as a separate religious institution from the church down the block is a contradiction in terms.

It's a wound. It's a grievous statement that both the church and Israel have not seen their unity and their connectedness. And because it has not seen it, it makes its own existence problematical.

The church is not the church until it really sees its relationship with Israel. And he calls this a wound, a gaping hole in the body of Christ, something which is quite intolerable. We have not seen and anguished over this and therefore we have allowed a kind of pluralism into the world.

This is my own comments that I'm adding. If God intended a union and a oneness of that which pertains to Israel and that which is the church, and we've allowed them to become fragmented and separated and become independent institutions, we've opened the door for the existence of other independent religious institutions. It makes the way for religious pluralism in the world.

There are consequences set in motion because we have not seen what God intends, that we should have seen about the relationship between the church and Israel. And so he's saying the very allowance of the synagogue is a contradiction, as if it has a valid existence independent from and other than the church, when they have the same head, they are related to the same God, the same Messiah, is the anticipation for the one and the Lord over the other. It's just a way of seeing, a way of viewing that he's trying to communicate.

If we have not been serious in this, have we been serious in anything, is my own question. The decisive question is not what the Jewish synagogue can be without him, but what the church is, as long as it allows a separate, hostile and alien Israel. Jewish missions is not the right word for the call to remove this breach.

It's not enough just to talk about Jews being saved. This is a much deeper question. This is the bringing together authentically the union that God himself intended from the first.

And it would take a remarkable re-seeing of itself, of the church, to see that it's not independent of the Jew and of Israel, but in a continuum, and one body, one house, so to speak, in the same way that the church needs to see, the church in the earth needs to see itself as one with those who have gone on before it. Again, a matter of seeing. And you're not going to solve this by just talking about a mission to the Jews.

It's something much more than an evangelistic thing that's required. It's a radical bringing together of what is now something broken and disjointed. What a dreadful thing, he says, is when the church itself has so little understood its own nature that it has not only withheld this knowledge from its brethren, its Jewish brethren, but made it difficult, if not impossible, for them.

The Jewish question, he asks, is it not really the Christian question? And how has it been historically answered? Not by integration, but by annihilation, and now threatening so again. This is so necessary for the church's own understanding of itself, calculated to save it from triumphalism through humbling, not only to affect its witness to the Jew, but everyone. It's a humbling thing for the church to see itself not as some independent entity separated from Israel, but part of the one thing that God intends, and that this humbling would be a virtue for the church, not only in its witness to the Jew, but its witness anywhere.

Remember Paul said, I would not have you to be ignorant of this mystery, lest you become wise in your own conceit, in Romans 11. Something is lost to the church when it fails to see its relatedness to the Jew. It's humbling for the church that has seen itself as Israel's successor to see itself as being in continuum and being related to Israel.

And it's that seeing and that humbling which affects the character of the church to make its witness to the Jew more powerful, but its witness anywhere. And then I just make a note to myself of the few places where I've seen this kind of consciousness and how it has affected that body. One place would be the Sisters of Mary in Germany, Basilia Schlenk's group, that when you pass onto their property, the whole atmosphere changes.

You sense something very heavenly. There's a peace there that is palpable and felt. And there's a real Hebraic content of their faith, being German sisters, that is not some kind of giddy, messianic, superficial dancing of horrors.

It's not their trying-to-be-Jewish kind of a thing, but because of their deep spiritual apprehension of the mystery of Israel and the connectedness of the church that has grown out of Israel and is God's instrument to bring Israel again to Himself and being one in God's sight, that it affects the very character of that work, of those women, of that place, that it's actually felt in their atmosphere. It's deeper than Yiddishism. It's deeper than embracing cultural things.

There's nothing like that. Overtly Jewish, and yet there's something distinct in their atmosphere that is really heavenly, that I think is a profound statement of the fact that they have seen something that most of the church has not, and have embraced it. And for German women, that's all the more a significant accomplishment.

The other place that I saw it was in Japan. Isn't it remarkable that the two least likely national settings are the ones where I've most profoundly seen this deep spiritual thing that comes from an awareness of the union of the church with Israel, that there was a movement in the earlier years that no longer exists, but when it did, it was a glory. I'm privileged that as a very young believer, I was invited to visit them.

It was called the Tabernacle Movement and had its headquarters in Tokyo, but it was throughout all Japan. It already has some work in California with the Japanese community here, and established by a professor, Toshima, who had tried to escape the American military presence in Japan under MacArthur right after World War II, and had gone up into the hills and into the mountains, and he had the proverbial mountaintop experience. He was a Japanese Presbyterian, and God gave him a revelation on the mount of the Hebraic roots of the faith.

He came down from the mount, the transfixed man, and he established the original gospel movement. What he consciously sought to do was to strip contemporary Japanese Christianity of all of its Western cultural accretions and get it back to the original spiritual thing that it was at its inception in its Hebraic reality. And he so succeeded in that, that the power and the glory of that movement was like nothing I have ever seen in all of the years that have followed.

Powerful miracles, but not without kind of full gospel, charismatic, even seeking consciously for miracles, but they developed what they call a field of faith and love in which miracles just simply took place. In one of their conferences, I was walking through the building and I looked into a group of women praying, and there was a young girl of about nine years of age stretched out, and they had laid her down on the floor. I had seen her mother carrying her, and the two legs were just dangling like jelly.

Evidently, she had been born in that condition, had never walked, and she was laid out before them. They were not even praying for her. They were praying among themselves, and what arrested my attention was the intensity of their prayer.

There was something so fervent about this movement that when you would come to the early morning sessions of the conference, like two blocks away, I thought I heard about 10,000 birds in the trees singing like nothing I've ever heard, and I turn a corner, and there they are spread out all over the lawn before that conference building, women together and men separately together, but like braided candles. I don't have a way to say this. There was such an intensity of prayer and faith working by love like nothing I've ever seen, and so it was true also that day when I walked by that room where the women were praying, and I hardly passed it when a shriek went up, and I came running back to see what had happened.

The girl was standing upright, erect on her feet. She had not even been explicitly prayed for, and they said this is the kind of thing that happens often. I remember when the head of the Jewish community, the rabbi from Israel, came in with his Brooklyn Jewish wife, and he was transfixed on the spot.

He was a whole sea of Japanese people. There was a menorah on the platform, and they were singing in Hebrew, and it wasn't some kind of studied thing like look how cute we can be, and we've learned to sing choruses in Hebrew. There was something so authentically Hebraic, something so true, that is the inheritance of all the saints, whether you're Jewish by birth or not.

I'm a Jew by birth, but before my conversion, I was as much a Jew spiritually as a stone. Remember we said of these stones, if my disciples will not cry out, these stones will cry out. So what I'm getting at is that there's a dimension and a quotient of something that has been lost to the church that would really make the church significantly the church.

Yet to miss it spiritually and to think to apprehend it culturally is equally to miss it. It's not a cute overlay or something that we do because we like the music and that kind of thing. It's a spiritual thing.

I don't even like to use the word, it's not Jewish. The word Jewish itself is almost a generic term of exilic life, which is the statement of our life under the judgment of God. That's why we're born in Brooklyn and Moscow and other places.

But there's something original. This was the original gospel movement, the tabernacle movement that caught the reality of this among Japanese believers. And I thought to myself, if my mother could walk into this building now and sense the presence of God, unmistakably the God of Israel, and hear Japanese believers singing praises to him in this ancient language, she'd fall on her face in a moment.

All of my futile efforts over 20 or more years to persuade her of being in vain, this unspoken demonstration of this reality would have dissolved her on the spot. I think that this is what this German theologian is feeling for. And I thought it worthwhile enough to share with you.

Okay, that's just the four spice. That was just to wet your whistle and to encourage your own reflection and to have a greater sense of respect and esteem for the invisible cloud of witnesses who are not just passive onlookers, but actually convey or confer and bring a dimension from the eternal realm, where they already are, into our present in ways that we cannot perhaps identify or of which we're not even conscious. We might be receiving that assist even now and not knowing it.

But God knows that we need that assist. But it would be good to be conscious because the world has compartmentalized us. We agree with them.

We separate the sacred and the secular. We separate eternity and time. We separate the profane and the holy, which, by the way, condemns everything, finally, to becoming profane.

God wants the penetration of the holy into the profane. He wants the penetration of the eternal into the present. He wants the sacred into the secular.

So that's how naive I was as a young believer returning to the teaching profession that I didn't realize that I was now in a secular setting and you were not to communicate to students in an American history class things pertaining to salvation or a world history class. I just did it. Where do you draw the line? Where do you say that this is a subject matter? It's all life.

It's all reality. It's all the issue of eternity. And indeed, students were being saved in my class.

I remember on one occasion I gave an altar call. Seventeen kids raised their hands and received the Lord. And the Lord said, how do you say it? If you'll not come to me, I'll come to you.

And it came out of a discussion of problems coming right up out of world history and what is the solution? Is there a solution? And the cry and the need for God and redemption and do we know him? And remember when we talked about the history of Israel and they performed sacrifice and then I picked up Isaiah 53 and I read it and ended up giving an invitation. Or I give a review for the end of the year and we come to the 20th century having surveyed world history from its inception and I have a great question mark on the blackboard atomic annihilation, cultural collapse, moral decay and I would say to the students I wish I could end the year on an encouraging note and say that I have hope moral decay and I would say to the students I wish I could end the year on an encouraging note and say that I have hope for mankind that we will have learned from history and bring the wisdom of the past to bear on our present problems but I have to say that I would be not truthful to indicate that that I have the deepest pessimism about the ability of man to resolve the dilemmas of this final century and that the only hope for mankind is the recognition of God alone and I go on like that and then the bell would ring and the class would empty out and I'm picking up my papers and I hear psst, psst, psst and I'm looking and there's a kid who's come back he's trembling like a leaf in the hallway Mr. Katz he said what must I do to be saved and I go out in the hallway and I pray with him and well you can realize by the end of that school year I had been invited up to the principal's office four times with complaints largely from Christian parents isn't that ironic that their kids were getting so radicalized that their parents were afraid that they were not going to go on to college and to split level successes and that huh well

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