

Not With Observation

by Burris A. Jenkins

The kingdom of God is not material or visible, but rather moral and spiritual, leading to hope and assurance.

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Matthew 7:21, Mark 1:15, Luke 10:9, Luke 17:20, John 3:3, John 18:36, Acts 1:8, Romans 14:17, 1 Corinthians 4:20

Topics: "Kingdom Of God", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Burris A. Jenkins preaches about the misconception of the kingdom of God, emphasizing that it does not come with visible signs or materialistic measures. He highlights how the ancient Hebrews and even the church throughout history have erred in expecting the kingdom to manifest through material success, numbers, and power. Jenkins warns against negative and materialistic conceptions of the kingdom, which can lead to despair, exclusion, and violence, stressing that the true kingdom is moral, spiritual, positive, and not bound by visible boundaries.

Transcript

Text.--"The kingdom of God cometh not with observation."--Luke 17:20.

There is a good deal of falsity in the old saw, "Seeing is believing." Some of the finest things we believe we never have seen, never can see. The kingdom of God is one of these.

The ancient Hebrews expected to see it and feel it and locate it and bound it. They hoped to behold it coming with all the pomp and majesty of the empire of David and Solomon. From what we know of the literature of that period immediately preceding the coming of the Messiah, all Israel was on tiptoe, eyes to the east, awaiting a restoration of their pristine, but now faded and shattered, glories. They were no doubt secretly armed and organized, awaiting that day. The fishermen of Galilee, the shepherds of Judea, the young sons of princely houses in Jerusalem, all with their chosen leaders, watchwords and standards, were only awaiting the signal for revolt. They would finally have taken Jesus by force and crowned him king. But, "My kingdom is not of this world."

The same spirit has always cropped out, more or less, in Christian history. The church has, once and again, thought to usher in the kingdom by violence and to measure its advent by visible manifestations. The Crusaders and the Round-head army of Puritan England, St. Bartholomew and the Gunpowder Plot, were but samples of this spirit. And so is every impulse of the church to measure the presence and success of the kingdom by the senses, by numbers, wealth, power, or any material manifestation

whatsoever.

If we have come up to this Centennial in any pride of our visible system, our million and a quarter, our treasuries and foundations, our buildings and prestige, it will be worth our while to consider a moment the word of our Lord: [504] "The kingdom cometh not with observation."

Three things characterize these mistaken conceptions of the kingdom. They are material, they are negative, and they lead to despair.

1. Our age is considerably affected by materialism. Men are accustomed to count success by size, mass, wealth, numbers and noise. The successful man is the man who makes things go--things, mark you! And the church, like all the rest, is infected with the microbe of materialism. When we see a great crowd and a great noise, a shouting and a hullabaloo, we are tempted to cry out, "Hosanna! the kingdom is at hand!"

Mark Twain tells us how an old Southern Negro first saw a Mississippi steamer plowing round a bend in the river; how the old uncle took it for God as he saw the rolling smoke and flying sparks, heard the mighty coughing of the engines, and felt the very throb and pulsations of the steam; how the old man fell on his knees on the river cliff and cried out, "Lord, have mercy! The kingdom am a-comin'!" That old black uncle was no more material in his conception of the kingdom than are we, if we measure its advent by the smoke and the noise we see and hear.

There are at least three kinds of churches in our cities, and perhaps even among us Disciples, that do violence to Jesus' notion of the kingdom. They may be termed the "Prosperous Church," the "Pyrotechnical Church," and the "Philosophical Church."

The prosperous church is gloriously built and appointed; under its high-vaulted dome rolls the splendid organ; through the delicate tracery of its art glass streams the softened light; through its cloistered arches ring the voices of its well-paid choir. The foot of the worshiper sinks deep into its noiseless carpeting. Its pews are luxuriously upholstered and induce repose. If one is materially successful in the commercial or social life of the city, he is sure of a high seat. If not, he takes his chance.

The pyrotechnical church is built for crowds. Its seating capacity rivals that of the greatest theaters and halls--also its attractions. Brass is there, musical and oratorical. The facade of this church is plastered all over with clouds of signs by day and clouds of incandescent lights by night, advertising the spectacular subjects of the pastor, and the "bill" of the week's performances.

The philosophical church is dignified, quiet and cold. It is a revolt from the other two, and its manner is marked by intellectualism. Here wise men, and especially the wise schoolmarms, resort--the mental elite of the municipality. These are they who have come up out of the rudiments of religion into a freedom from all religion.

If a preacher is asked to preach in the prosperous church, let him take his

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best coat; in the pyrotechnical church, his best bundle of popular skyrockets and roman-candles; in the philosophical church, his doctor's thesis. If a worshiper goes into the prosperous church, he will find an air heavy with perfumes that are not of sweet incense to God; if into the pyrotechnical church, an atmosphere laden with false emotions, false laughter and false tears; if into the philosophical church, he will see his

breath in the frosty air.

The first two of these churches are material in their view of the kingdom, and the third leans so far back from these as to fall the other way. Golden means are hard to preserve.

2. Violent conceptions, like these, are generally negative in character. They draw boundary-lines for the kingdom and shut many out. They persecute, try and ostracize men. They are usually creeded faiths, either with written or unwritten standards, by which men are tested as to their entrance into the kingdom--tested by their fellow-men.

Jesus met the grandees of the Jewish church upon the temple stairs, and they, preventing his entrance, demanded his authority. He met them and defeated them in debate, and then denounced them as hypocrites, saying, "Ye neither enter the kingdom yourselves, nor [505] suffer those that are entering to enter in." God forbid that the grandees of the church of Christ should ever meet the Master in any of his little ones upon the temple steps and refuse him entrance. "Do you believe this? Do you believe that? If not, ye can not enter here!" This spirit of negation is violence toward the kingdom. "Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ?" That one question, and that only, is sufficient. That is the real creed of Christendom.

The kingdom is not to be visibly bounded. No man can say of it, "Lo here or lo there; for the kingdom of God is among you." That is to say, the boundary of it is a waving line, and would, if seen, cut out many now supposed to be chiefest in the kingdom, and cut in many now supposed to be without.

3. Such material and negative conceptions also must lead to despair. The kingdom is not to be compared, for material achievement, with the great secular undertakings of men. Our buildings, none of them, can stand beside the great commercial structures of our country for size, cost and magnificence. Our numbers are not comparable to the numbers of political parties or military movements. Our treasuries are but pittances when laid beside the great insurance or banking or railroad corporations of the day.

If we are priding ourselves on material success today, let us recall that our million of church-goers is but a drop in comparison with the millions upon millions, even here in our own land, who never darken a church door; our church structures are small beside our court-houses and theaters; our college endowments meager beside those of great secular institutions.

No, if I believed that the kingdom of God were material and capable of being bounded, I should do one of two things: either I should quit the pulpit and take to the sword, and try to persuade or compel my fellow-ministers to do the same, and, like, Mahomet, drive men into the kingdom, or else, like Job, on an ash-heap of despair, with no potsherd of comfort in my affliction, be tempted to curse God and die.

But, thank God, Jesus' idea was not material, but moral and spiritual; not negative, but positive and constructive; and therefore leads not to despair, but to an unending and undying hope.

Our greatest successes, then, are not to be seen, counted and measured in this past century, for the kingdom cometh not with observation. The future, therefore, is big with hope, rosy with assurance, radiant with certainty.

"Fair is our lot, goodly is our heritage.

Humble ye, my people, and be fearful in your mirth,

For the Lord our God most high he hath made the deep as dry,

He hath smote for us a pathway to the ends of all the earth."

These words of a national poet, writing for a nation, may be true of a church, a movement like ours, if, estimating things at proper values and no more, we go forward after moral and spiritual conquest.

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