

The Church of Our Lord

by Olin Alfred Curtis

The Kingdom of God is a simple personal and spiritual organism, while the Church of Our Lord is a formal and complex organism, with the Holy Spirit being the life of the Church, but Jesus Christ our Redeemer being the major axis.

Scripture: Matthew 5:14, Luke 17:21, Romans 14:17, 1 Corinthians 15:24, Ephesians 5:27

Topics: "Kingdom Of God", "The Church"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis preaches about the Kingdom of God, emphasizing that it is the highest good granted by God to the community established through Christ's revelation. While the church represents the visible aspect of His kingdom, they are not interchangeable entities. The Kingdom of God is both a present reality and a future ideal, where God reigns over loyal subjects. The church, as the concrete expression of the Kingdom of Christ, serves as a means to advance towards the ideal Kingdom of God.

Transcript

Das Reich Gottes ist das von Gott gewährtete höchste Gut der durch seine Offenbarung in Christus gestifteten Gemeinde; allein es ist als das höchste Gut nur gemeint, indem es zugleich als das sittliche Ideal gilt, zu dessen Verwirklichung die Glieder der Gemeinde durch eine bestimmte gegenseitige Handlungsweise sich unter einander verbinden.

-- Albrecht Ritschl, Unterricht in der christlichen Religion.

Our Lord nowhere simply identifies his kingdom, or the kingdom of God, with the church which he came to found. As we have seen, his kingdom is visibly represented in his church; but there are insuperable obstacles to treating the two things as convertible. Our Lord founded a society which was to be visible like a city seated on a hill that cannot be hid (Matt. 5:14), but the kingdom of God is visible only to faith -- the kingdom of God is within you -- the church is present and actual, the kingdom of God is present and yet future, actual and yet ideal. The kingdom of God is the supreme end, the visible church a means and instrument to that end. The kingdom of God is in its essential idea the reign of God; those over whom he reigns, and who answer to that reign by loyal allegiance constitute a kingdom in the sense of a body of subjects, and this is the ideal toward which the church must ever be advancing.

-- Archibald Robertson, Regnum Dei, the Bampton Lectures, 1901, pp. 75, 76.

The kingdom of Christ, not being a kingdom of this world, is not limited by the restrictions which fetter other societies, political or religious. It is in the fullest sense free, comprehensive, universal. ... It is most important that we should keep this ideal definitely in view, and I have therefore stated it as broadly as possible. Yet the broad statement, if allowed to stand alone, would suggest a false impression, or at least would convey only a half truth. . . . The conception, in short, is strictly an ideal, which we must ever hold before our eyes, which should inspire and interpret ecclesiastical polity, but which nevertheless cannot supersede the necessary wants of human society, and, if crudely and hastily applied, will lead only to signal failure. As appointed days and set places are indispensable to her efficiency, so also the church could not fulfill the purposes for which she exists, without rulers and teachers, without a ministry of reconciliation -in short, without an order of men who may in some sense be designated a priesthood. . . . But the priestly functions and privileges of the Christian people are never regarded as transferred or even delegated to these officers. They are called stewards or messengers of God, servants or ministers of the church, and the like; but the sacerdotal title is never once conferred upon them. The only priests under the gospel, designated as such in the New Testament, are the saints, the members of the Christian brotherhood.

-- Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *The Christian Ministry*, Dissertation I in *Com. on Philipians*.

The Kingdom of God. Before stating my own view of the significance of the "kingdom of God" I wish to call your attention to a scholar's protest which has been made by Professor Briggs against the modern Protestant practice of sharply distinguishing between the meaning of **basileia** and the meaning of **ekklesia**, as these terms are used in the Word of God. He says: "Let me say that I have Carefully examined all the uses of these and cognate terms in both Testaments, and as a result of my investigations I declare that nothing can be more false than the distinction between 'kingdom' and 'church' asserted by many moderns. These are chiefly men who are displeased with the historic church and seek refuge in the kingdom as taught by Jesus Christ in the conceit that this is something larger and better. In fact, 'church' and 'kingdom' differ only as synonymous terms. There is nothing of importance which can be asserted of the kingdom of God which may not be also asserted of the church of God, if we faithfully use biblical material without speculation and theorizing. Jesus is King of the kingdom, and he reigns over it, subduing all external enemies under his feet, or transforming them by his grace into citizens of his kingdom. He is also the head over all things to his church. The church and the kingdom are coextensive; both are Old Testament institutions and New Testament institutions; both are institutions of this world, and both are eternal institutions of the world to come; both are organizations in the midst of the world and of the universe; both will eventually subdue and absorb the world and also the universe; the one is as spiritual as the other; the one is as external as the other."

The conclusions of Professor Briggs as a biblical scholar have, and should have, great weight with us; still I can but feel that in this instance his entire study of the scripture teaching has been superficial. When, for one example, our Lord says, "Thy kingdom come," can we believe that by kingdom he means exactly the church which he came to establish and to which he committed the sacrament of baptism? I cannot believe so. It is contrary to the whole tone and drift of his teaching. I am quite ready to admit that now and again the two Greek words, as we see them in the New Testament, slip into each other's province, and that a line of absolute consistency in usage it is impossible to trace through all the various writings; but I hold that there are plain indications of facts which are not the same; and that these facts should not be confused in our thinking, if we are ever fully to understand the Word of God and all Christian history.

My own view I can give economically as follows:

1. Let us start with God's unrealized plan to have an ultimate kingdom. Most comprehensively considered, the kingdom of God is the final, universal, absolute, everlasting dominion of God. All persons, all events, all creation will express the one fact -- God rules. This is the sublime ideal toward which the universe struggles. But there is another sense in which the kingdom of God is a present reality. It has already begun in the hearts of angels and saints. And all its great spiritual laws are in operation -- "the world of invisible laws by which God is ruling and blessing his creatures." The entire movement in the moral government is in an important sense expressive of the kingdom of God.

2. In this ultimate kingdom of God there is to be a cosmic sweep. The final universe -everything as formed and placed and used -- every person in either his character or his condition -will manifest the sovereign holiness of God. I mean that in God's ultimate kingdom the entire cosmos will not merely conform to his will, but will show forth his nature. The obedience will reveal something more than power, it will reveal the perfect divine holiness.

3. Within this cosmic kingdom, there is to be "the kingdom of heaven." This inner kingdom will be made up of all holy persons, all those having "the vision of God," and experiencing the ineffable felicity of the divine fellowship. The beginning of this kingdom of heaven is in the present life of the angels of God; but the kingdom will be fully realized only after the general resurrection.

4. Within this kingdom of heaven there is to be "the kingdom of Christ." This is a very definite matter, even that new race of men redeemed by the death of our Lord, and organized in him, and glorified in bodily conformity to him. This kingdom of Christ is also now in existence in an incomplete way, and comprehends all those persons who are by saving faith actually joined to Jesus Christ. The test is this actual union with Christ and not whether the persons are members of the Christian church or not.

5. These three, the cosmic kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, and the kingdom of Christ, are to be conceived under the figure of three concentric circles (recall our discussion of the moral government); so that the kingdom of heaven is the inner dominion of the cosmic kingdom, and the kingdom of Christ is the inner dominion of the kingdom of heaven, and also the innermost dominion of the cosmic kingdom, and all three constitute the kingdom of God.

6. This kingdom of God, taken in its entirety, is the kingdom of God the Father, which is the kingdom referred to in the Lord's Prayer. The full consummation of this kingly dominion of God the Father is to take place when our Saviour "shall deliver up the kingdom to God, even the Father, . . . that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15.24-28). This does not mean that Christ is to become anything less to his own people whom he hath redeemed, but merely that Christ and his kingdom are to become an integrant feature of the larger kingdom of God over which only the Father is to be the absolute and everlasting Ruler. It is the last extreme emphasis of that idea of the inherent subordination of the Son of God which is a fundamental idea in the whole system of Christian doctrine.

7. What, then, is the church of our Lord? It is the concrete exponent of the kingdom of Christ. It is a formal organization of men which stands for the kingdom of Christ while that kingdom is in the process of formation. Not exactly, as Kahnis said, "an aeon of the kingdom"; but rather, as Dr. Årseke said, "the workshop of the kingdom"; or, as Neander most beautifully said, "the seminary for the heavenly community." I am willing to allow just this much: The church of our Lord belongs to his tentative kingdom; but it is not coextensive with that kingdom (even as that kingdom exists today), and cannot be coextensive with it until, anyway, there is what Saint Paul terms "a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any

such thing" (Eph. 5.27). But even this admission is somewhat misleading, for to many it will suggest that the difference between the kingdom and the church is merely that one is perfect and the other is imperfect. That, though, is not the fundamental difference. The fundamental difference is one of essential structure. The kingdom is a simple personal and spiritual organism. The church is a formal and complex organism. The kingdom is a life of fellowship mediated only through Jesus Christ. The church is a machine; at its best a machine full of life and expressing life, and yet a machine. In its worship and in all its service the church has, and must have, some sort of outward instrument -- forms, symbols, creeds, what not; but the kingdom needs only the complete man. If, as some believe, the Christian church itself is to be purified, completed, glorified, and then taken into eternity for everlasting worship and service, even then it will not be, strictly speaking, the kingdom of our Lord, but merely the formal instrument of that kingdom. It will be, perhaps, to the kingdom as a whole what the glorified body will be to the one moral person -- the instrumental means of perfect objective manifestation. The kingdom of Christ may, so to speak, show its life to the entire universe through a glorified church -- Saint Paul's **endoxos ekklesia**.

The Holy Catholic Church. As Protestants we cannot afford to surrender this great historic phrase. Nor should we transform its original meaning into that of "the invisible church of Christ." The holy catholic church is precisely the visible church of our Lord, that is, the entire body of persons who are in actual organization about the two points, the gospel and the sacraments. Whenever a company of men unite, in any way whatsoever, to maintain the preaching of the gospel of redemption, and to secure the administration of the sacrament of baptism, and to have Christian communion in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, that company of men constitutes a Christian church; and the sum total of such churches is the holy catholic church.

Forms of ecclesiastical government, and preferences in ceremony, and peculiarities of denominational belief, have no large significance; the essential points of organization are simply the two sacraments and the preaching of the gospel. This church of our Lord is holy, not in the sense that every member is now entirely holy in personal life, but in the sense that the church is our Lord's own instrument in building up a holy kingdom. The whole plan and movement of the church are unto holiness.

This holy church is catholic in the sense that it is for all men. In it there is no ethnic limitation. Its ambition is for world-wide conquest. Catholicity is to the church just what the racial plan is to the kingdom of Christ. It is the humanity-note. In this holy catholic church there are three kinds of membership: First, there is formal membership. In many situations there are men who submit to all the tests used, and become members of an organized church, and yet do not have any redemptional relation to Jesus Christ.

Of course the question soon arises, "Are these formal members really members of the church of our Lord at all?" I myself find it best to regard them as in the holy catholic church, but not members of the kingdom of Christ. This view renders possible large emphasis upon the absolute need of having a Christian experience; and yet, with this emphasis, a certain practical wisdom in pastoral work. And, further, the view is helpful when we try fairly to estimate the situation in any of the great national churches, or when we try to understand the condition of the whole Christian world.

Second, there is dynamic membership. I mean by this more than any one term can denote. The power of the holy catholic church is due to the Holy Spirit. But his action is (not wholly conditioned) largely related to those members of the church who are also members of the kingdom of redemption. They may be called the dynamic personal points of his action. For example, the force of a sermon, or the influence of a sacrament, depends, in quite a measure, upon the reality and vitality of the Christian experience of the

congregation.

And so every member of the church who actually lives in Christ Jesus adds a veritable dynamic to the church. Third, there is membership by Christian claim. The church of our Lord has the right and the duty to claim the helpless. She should take into her atmosphere and association and (if possible) service all people who are unable to make a choice for themselves -- not only all irresponsible children, but all the feeble-minded, and all those unfortunate souls who have been mentally wrecked by woes too terrible for human fortitude.

Of course, there are involved here serious questions in church economy, but they all can be met and mastered, if we are determined to make the church of Christ a worthy instrument of the kingdom of Christ.

But surely you will not misunderstand me here -- you will not think that I intend to teach the possibility of a mechanical salvation. No human being is saved, or can be saved, by membership in the holy catholic church -- salvation is only by personal union with Jesus Christ.

The Organism of the Church. To appreciate the philosophy of the organism of the holy catholic church, we need to remember that, as the concrete exponent of the kingdom of Christ or the new race, the church is also designed to be a brotherhood of moral persons dominated by Jesus Christ. Thus there are three features to be protected and emphasized in the church-organism: 1. The personal. 2. The societal. 3. The spiritual, in fellowship with Christ. I can get at these three features most lucidly, I think, by comparing the organism of the church to the structure of an ellipse, with its two foci and a major axis.

First, in the church, there is the personal focus. This is the preaching of the gospel. Not merely the Christian sermon, but all personal testimony, everything which is done in the church to show what the gospel means to separate persons. The purpose is to bring about the conquest of the world by the church through this personal 'feature of preaching. And how wonderful it all is, this giving to the world the entire message of redemption through the experience of men! The most effective Christian sermon is really nothing other than a chapter of the inner life of a person who lives in our Lord Jesus 'Christ. The moment the sermon loses that personal quality, that moment the sermon ceases to be effective. Do you not begin to apprehend the philosophy -- one might almost say the strategy -- of this personal focus? Why, we reach the great Christian verities through each other, our very apprehension of the finalities of the gospel is only by entering the living personal experience of Christian men. And so every time you grasp a Christian truth it prepares you to understand better the life of Christian men; and to live -- helpfully, joyously, to live with them forever. Thus, the whole Christian brotherhood comes to its mighty certainties of faith in one great entanglement of personal experience, the very emphasis upon personality making a contribution to ultimate fellowship.

Second, the societal focus. But it is not enough to preach the gospel through persons; the Christian society, as an organized body, must have a chance to express itself. Hence the second focus, which is the focus of the Christian sacraments. Not now are we to consider the significance of each sacrament; I merely wish you to note the fact and worth of the sacramental idea in the organism of the church. This focus is a perfect balance to the other. As the aim of preaching is to stir up personality, to make men think, to keep the personal life from stagnation, so the sacramental aim is to fill consciousness with the sense of Christian companionship, to make the person realize that he is only a part of the large Christian community. In both sacraments it is the holy catholic church which dominates the scene. The person is there surely, but he is there for submission and fellowship. His very meditation and confession and

consecration are in the midst.

Third, there is (to keep our ellipse in mind) a major axis. This major feature in the organism of the church is, some would insist, the Holy Spirit. Such insistence is a mistake. Indeed, there is, I fear, in our day, an emphasis placed upon the Holy Spirit which is not quite true to the New Testament. To protect with words every side of the matter is extremely difficult; but I will say this: No emphasis is ever to be given to the Holy Spirit which, in any moment or in any degree, shuts our Lord out from the Christian consciousness. The real work of the Spirit always exalts Christ; that is his mission. As to the church, the Holy Spirit is the very life of it all. The preaching, the sacraments, the service, are literally nothing without his presence and power. But the major axis is only Jesus Christ our Redeemer. And just what do I mean by this? I mean that the spiritual organism of the church requires actual fellowship with Christ. You have a complete organism to just the extent that in the sacraments and in the preaching and in all the work the people are in conscious union with Jesus Christ. This implies, you easily perceive, that it is only dynamic membership which contributes to the spiritual organism of the church. O, if we all could only feel this; if every Christian preacher could only realize that size is not what the organism requires for its completeness and efficiency, but fellowship, actual fellowship with Jesus Christ. If you say that conversions are the test of church efficiency, I will say that conversions will follow if the church is in living union with our Lord.

A further word of caution is necessary in this connection, owing to certain widespread tendencies: Fellowship with Christ cannot normally be secured in the church by exalting his person at the expense of his atonement. It verily seems as if the whole realm of Christian scholarship was trying to minimize the death of the Son of God. The tendency is not only wrong, but even pernicious. Fully to enter into the life of Christ, one needs to be overwhelmed by his death as Saint Paul was overwhelmed by it until he could hardly think a thought which was not colored by its sacrificial meaning.

Christian Unity. At this point I cannot speak an effective word; for I am out of sympathy with every effort to crush out the denominational churches in the name of Christian unity. I believe in uniting all those churches where the fundamental interpretation of the Christian faith is the same; but I do not believe in asking any church to yield any real conviction. In the present state of things there is more Christian vitality in these denominational convictions than in all the superficial combinations of forced external conformity. Solidarity is the ultimate, is the Christian ideal; but real Christian solidarity cannot come by sacrificing personality to machinery. I fully appreciate the dreadful fact of waste; but a waste of life is better than any artificial economy.

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