

T H E

P R O T E S T A N T

F A I T H

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

by
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Different religions have had varying views about God's control of the world, but the Bible's teaching is very clear and consistent. In the Bible God teaches us that He is sovereign Lord, and completely in control of the universe. He created it by a decision of His will; as the Psalmist put it: God spoke and it was done. He commanded and they came into being (Psalm 33:9). There is no event in this world of which He is unaware or which happens apart from His sovereign control. That is why Christians can be so carefree; because they know that God, their loving Heavenly Father, controls everything, and has promised that nothing will enter their life which will not in the end be for their good (Romans 8:28). They cast their cares on Him, because He cares for them (I Peter 5:7). In this way Christians are called on to glorify God, that is, they are to show by their attitudes of trust and by their actions of love what God's character is, namely that He is in fact a sovereign, loving Father.

However, we sometimes wonder why this sovereign God seems at times to work so slowly in vindicating the right. We will find help in this problem if we pay attention to what Jesus had to say about God's methods. Frequently in Jesus' teaching the phrase occurs "the kingdom of God is like". This is simply the equivalent of saying "the way God controls His world is as follows". The word "kingdom" in the Bible means "act of ruling", not as in modern English the people or land over whom the king rules. The kingdom of God and the kingdom of Heaven are identical phrases and they mean, as I say, the ruling of God. So that when Jesus began a parable with the words "the kingdom of God is like", He means "the way God works as sovereign King is as follows". Many of the parables speak of the kingdom of God, that is of the way God

exercises His sovereign Lordship and we can learn about God's methods by studying these parables. There is one in particular repeated in each of the first three Gospels, where Jesus says "the kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field". As a seed, mustard is smaller than any other but when it has grown it becomes quite a shrub. From this comparison, or parable, we learn that in exercising His Lordship over the world God starts with small beginnings which are hardly noticeable, but which keep on growing and growing in influence till they become dominant. A knowledge that this is God's method should stimulate us to persevere praying and fighting for the right, even when things are discouraging. As St. Paul said: "Your labour is not in vain in the Lord".

There are many examples in history illustrating this method of God. Thus when God was bringing salvation through Jesus Christ He began 2,000 years before by calling a single man, Abraham, to leave his home at the commandment and on the promise of God. The world historian of the day would never have noticed this insignificant move of Abraham, but from it stemmed the whole history of God's people. Or in the more recent history of our own time, the few Christians who met round a committee table to plan for the abolition of slavery started a movement insignificant at first, but which brought about great changes for good in society. Many more illustrations could be given, but the life of Jesus Himself is sufficient proof that God works through the apparently insignificant to bring about His purposes. Jesus' coming into the world was insignificant - in a manger at Bethlehem. His early life was insignificant - in a small village of Galilee. His personal build was insignificant if we may judge from the prophecy of Isaiah, "He had no form nor comeliness". Jesus accomplished His mission not by the outward trappings which attract

and impress the eye, but by the inner perfection of His character and the sublimity of His teaching and His obedience to the will of the Father, "obedient to death, even the death on the cross" so that now He has been "highly exalted and given the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow".

St. Paul drew attention to this same method of God in the formation of the church at Corinth. Thus he wrote to the Corinthians in his first letter, chapter 1, verse 26, "My brothers, think what sort of people you are whom God has called. Few of you are men of wisdom by any human standard, few are powerful or highly born, yet to shame the wise God has chosen what the world counts folly, and to shame the strong God has chosen what the world counts weakness. God chose what is low and despised in the world, mere nothings, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God".

St. Paul himself had personal experience of the wisdom of this method of God's when he was praying for the removal of what he called "a thorn in the flesh". We do not know exactly what this thorn was, but it was something that St. Paul thought a hindrance to him and he prayed for its removal. But God gave him the answer that this very weakness was an advantage to the Gospel because it made clear to everybody that it was God Who was at work and it was not merely Paul using his own natural abilities. Thus our weakness may be an opportunity for God's character to be seen. Not that God cannot work through the great and powerful but we men and women are so sinful that we are hypnotized by these outward trappings, greatness, nobility and pomp, and we look no further than these for an explanation. But when we see God using things of which we would normally take no account, then it is obvious to all that it is God Who is at work and God is given the glory as is due. This is an important principle to keep in mind. This was doubtless one of the reasons why our Lord was not

born into a noble and rich family and it is a mistake to think that He achieved His ministry by dazzling natural gifts as some artists would have us think. There is no suggestion of this in the Scripture but rather the reverse. On the contrary, the methods on which He relied were the transparent character of His life and the inner truth of His teaching.

In seeking to follow in our Lord's steps Christians and the Christian churches need to be on guard against the temptation of using worldly methods to attract and to impress, because although these methods may win a following, they will not serve God's purposes of displaying His character. We are to take no short cut to obtain our objectives, but rather remember that the way God works is like a grain of mustard seed which a man puts in his garden, quite unnoticed by anybody, but it keeps on growing until it becomes a conspicuous shrub in which the birds can roost. We, on the other hand, are inclined to think that prominent church buildings, and titles of distinction amongst Christians, and plenty of money are an assistance in the work of God but they may in fact be real hindrances, for these things may attract people for the wrong reason, because they are impressed in a this-worldly way with these high sounding titles, or affluence, or prominent buildings, or outward greatness and influence. But God works through the inward, through prayer and faithfulness, and through the change of heart brought about by the Holy Spirit, and those outward things though impressive to the worldly mind, obscure God's character rather than reveal it, and in this way get in the way of God's work rather than assist it.

Jesus several times warned us against confusing the ways of the world with the ways of

God's kingdom or rule. He told Pilate "My kingdom is not of this world, otherwise my servants would fight"; that is to say, if Christ's kingdom belonged to this world He would use the ordinary means of the world for advancing it and defending it. But Christ's rule and sovereignty is of a Heavenly sort, and His enemy and ours is a spiritual enemy who must be overcome with spiritual weapons, such as prayer, love and faithfulness. Every Christian must make his contribution in this fight, persevering in standing up for what is right, although progress seems slow, remembering Jesus' story about the grain of mustard.

On the evening of the Last Supper, Jesus gave another warning to His disciples not to copy the methods of the world. He said in Luke 22:25 "The Kings of the nations exercise lordship over them and those in authority over them are given the title of Benefactor. But it is not to be so with you". To the same effect a few days earlier Jesus told His disciples that they should neither give nor receive titles. He said in Matthew 23:8,9, "Do not be called rabbi because one is your teacher and you are all brethren, and call no man your father on earth for one is your father, in the heavens, and neither be called master for one is your master, even Christ". In this passage Jesus explicitly forbids us to confer the spiritual title of "Father" on any of our fellow Christians because such a title obscures the truth that God is our spiritual father. "Call no man father on earth, for one is your father in the heavens". Christians are all equally brethren together with one spiritual Father - God Himself. To confer or to accept such titles from our fellow Christians creates distinctions and separation where none should exist and suggests that we depend on a human intermediary, rather than each of us having direct access to God.

Jesus drew His disciples' attention to the ingrained habit amongst mankind of conferring complimentary titles on those in authority, but He forbade this amongst His followers, "It shall not be so among you", for though there are differences of duties and differences of offices and ministries in the church there are not to be differences of gradation or rank reflected in distinctions of titles. To disregard Christ's words in this matter is to make a snare for our own souls, and a snare to those who receive the title or who covet it.

As a corrective to this tendency we should recall what our objective is both as individual Christians and as the church. Our one object should be, not that we be successful in achieving this or that, so much as that God might be glorified in us, that is, that God's character might be seen through us. It is God to Whom all attention must be directed. The means we use, whether human or material, must never intrude so as to attract the attention and seize the imagination of those whom we are seeking to influence. We are to influence them by God's character seen in our lives and by God's Word on our lips, and not by any impressive feature which might attract them from a this-worldly point of view, whether an impressive building or impressive status. These things may be effective in the short run in attracting attention and increasing our own influence and that of our denomination in the world around us, but they are a hindrance to the true objective of the Christian church of making known the character of God, Who, though a sovereign Lord, works in an unobtrusive way in order that all our attention might be concentrated on the things that matter rather than on the things which attract and impress at first sight.

The illustration of the mustard seed reminds us that God is exercising His sovereignty and bringing in His purposes of righteousness, even though in our brief life span we may not be able to observe much growth. But we are to persevere in obedience, and for this we will need the patience which springs from a strong faith in our sovereign Lord.

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