

THE WRONG PRIORITY

Christianity: Cult or Kingdom?

by STEPHEN PERKS

“Walk ye not in the statutes of your fathers, neither observe their judgements, neither defile yourselves with their idols: I am the Lord your God; walk in my statutes, and keep my judgements, and do them” (Ezek. 20:18–19).

THE chief and greatest error of the Christian Church throughout the two thousand years of her history has been to have had the wrong priority and to have made this erroneous priority the touchstone of orthodoxy. This error has existed in all branches and denominations; it continues to this day and the Church worldwide shows little if any sign that she understands the problem let alone that she is prepared to repent of the idolatry that is at the heart of it. Yet the results of this error have been catastrophic for the mission of the Church.

The Church has told us almost universally and almost continually that the rituals, worship services and prayer meetings of the institutional Church are the essence of the Christian faith, the most important aspect of the Christian life, the most spiritual activity that the Christian can engage in, and that therefore these activities constitute the highest and purest form of worship that the Christian can offer to God and consequently that they are the most important thing in life that he can do. It is this nucleus of activities that constitutes the Church’s highest priority and therefore the *Christian’s* highest priority, and it is this nucleus of activities that defines worship (where worship is understood as taking place in other contexts it is only because such worship takes a similar form, as a sort of satellite church service that mimics the form of regular services held in church buildings). This has been the priority that the Church has put first historically; and so great has been this emphasis, this idolatry, that we have been told repeatedly, and not only by the Roman Catholic Church, but by Protestants as well, that there can be no salvation outside of this formal organisation of the Church as an institutional cult with its rituals, government and discipline. And so, although the statement is not biblical, it has been claimed repeatedly that “He can no longer have God as his Father who does not have the Church for his mother.”¹

1. This is not a biblical doctrine. The statement goes back at least to Cyprian, a third century bishop of Carthage and martyr

But the truth is that this emphasis and priority has reduced the Christian religion to little more than a mystery cult, i.e. a personal salvation cult. To be saved one must join the cult and engage in the re-enactment of the mysteries through performance of the correct rituals. This may appear more obvious in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and other episcopal Churches, but it is not essentially any different in the Protestant Churches. The Roman Churches perform the Mass each Sunday, which is an attempt to re-enact in ritual form the sacrifice of Christ. The Anglican Churches celebrate the Eucharist each Sunday, which is more or less, depending on which kind of Anglican Church it is, Anglo-Catholic or Low Church, a dumbed-down version of the Mass. The Pentecostal and charismatic Churches attempt to re-enact the day of Pentecost each Sunday morning. The Reformed and Presbyterian Churches try to re-enact Reformed preaching and the worship services of the Reformation. The rituals vary but not the perspective, i.e. that what the congregation does on a Sunday morning in the Church service constitutes the essence of the Christian faith and therefore the highest priority of the Christian life. The Christian faith is deemed to be not essentially about a *life* of service, i.e. obedience to God in the whole of life, but rather about making sure the right rituals are performed in the Church meeting.

But is this biblical? Is this what the Lord Jesus Christ taught? Is it what the New Testament teaches? Emphatically not. There is nothing in the Bible that supports this perversion of the gospel. What then is the biblical priority? Jesus came preaching the *Kingdom*

(*On the Unity of the Church*, para. 6, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* [Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark/Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, trans. Ernest Wallis], Vol. V, p. 423a), but it has been repeated many times since both by Roman Catholics and Protestants and has become a widely accepted if unintelligent mantra of the Church. The real purpose of this doctrine throughout history has been to justify the excessive ecclesiastical authority that clergymen claim for themselves but have difficulty justifying in any other way.

of God (Mk 1:14), and he told us clearly what our priority should be: “seek ye first the *kingdom of God* and his *righteousness*” (Mt. 6:33). The Lord Jesus Christ does not often refer to the Church and never to its rituals and forms of worship.² Neither does the New Testament stress this idolatrous priority. It is the invention of clergymen, whose chief priority has always been put themselves and their own ecclesiastical work first, *not* the Kingdom of God.

Let’s take a test case. The disciples asked Jesus how to pray. His answer was what we call the Lord’s prayer (Mt. 6:9–13). We may confidently take it that this prayer teaches us clearly what the Lord’s priorities are in prayer, and here they are,—*this* is what Jesus commands us to pray for: *first*, that God’s name should be honoured; *second*, that we should seek the coming of the Kingdom of God; *third*, that we should ask for our needs to be met; *fourth*, that we should seek forgiveness for our sins and forgive others their sins in like manner; *fifth*, that we might not face temptation and be delivered from evil; and *sixth*, an affirmation that the Kingdom, power and glory belong to God. We are not even commanded to pray for the Church here, but for the *coming of the Kingdom*. Always, Jesus and the New Testament prioritise the *Kingdom of God*, not the Church. “Let us make sure” says V. H. Stanton “that we realise the extraordinarily prominent position which the subject of the Kingdom of God occupies in the Gospels, more especially in the Synoptics. This is *essential* if we would form a *true conception* of the nature of Christianity . . . descriptions of the characteristics of the Kingdom, explications of its laws, accounts of the way men were actually receiving it, forecasts of its future, make up the whole central portion of the synoptic narrative.”³ In short, “In our Lord’s teaching the Kingdom of God is the representative and all-embracing summary of his distinctive mission.”⁴

It is men who have made the Christian faith *Church-centred*, not the Lord Jesus Christ, and not the Bible. The consequence of this has been a truncated, cut-down, version of the gospel, which should be the good news of the *Kingdom of God* (Mk 1:14), not the good news of the Church, and the result has inevitably been a truncated, cut-down blessing.

Well, what is the Kingdom of God? Of course

2. He did of course institute the Lord’s Supper, but the Church abandoned Christ’s ordinance in the early centuries of the Church’s history and substituted for it a ritualistic and cultic reinterpretation of her own devising. See Stephen C. Perks, *The Christian Passover: Agape Feast or Ritual Abuse* (Taunton: Kuyper Foundation, 2012). For a PDF of the text see: <http://www.kuyper.org/storage/documents/The%20Christian%20Passover.pdf>

3. V. H. Stanton, *The Jewish and Christian Messiah: A Study in the Earliest History of Christianity* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1886), pp. 203f., 206; my emphasis.

4. Archibald Robertson, *Regnum Dei: Eight Lectures on the Kingdom of God in the History of Christian Thought* (London: Methuen and Co., 1901), p. 8.

most clergymen and their followers will define the Kingdom of God very narrowly in terms of their own ideas of the Church, practically at any rate if not theoretically. In other words even when clergymen do not assert that the Kingdom of God and the Church are coterminous, they usually behave practically as if they were and teach a version of the gospel in which this identification is implicit. And of course many clergymen and theologians have explicitly made this identification. But this is not the Christian gospel taught by the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles, nor by the New Testament. It is not the message of the Bible. Do not misunderstand what I am saying here. I am not claiming that there is no place for Church assemblies for the purpose of prayer, teaching, praising God, discussion, fellowship, encouragement and celebrating the Lord’s Supper. Nor am I saying that these things are not important. They are important. But they are not to be put first, as the overriding priority, because if they are they will pervert the biblical priority, as the Church has done for so long and continues to do, and this has resulted and will continue to result in the failure of the Church’s true mission, the discipling of the *nations*. Why? Because this can only be accomplished as the *Kingdom of God* is manifested on earth and God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven, i.e. among the nations. And this is precisely what the New Testament says will be the result of the fulfilling of the Great Commission: “And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of *this* world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall rule for ever and ever” (Rev. 11:15). Not “The kingdoms of this world are become the Church.” The mission is to create Christian *nations*, not merely individual believers. The mission is the coming of the *Kingdom of God on earth*, not bigger and better Churches.

But if the Kingdom of God is not the institutional Church, then what is it? The Kingdom of God is a divine political order that stands over and against all the political orders of men. Its origin and the source of its power and authority are not in this world, but it is God’s purpose that the Kingdom should be manifested in *this* world, that the lives of men and nations should be transformed into the Kingdom of God *on earth*, which is what we pray for in the Lord’s prayer, what the Lord Jesus Christ commissioned us to pursue in the Great Commission, and what we are told in Rev. 11:15 will be the final result of the Great Commission.

The word *kingdom* is a *political* word. A kingdom has a king, it has a population that is subject to the king, it has its own laws, and social forms that embody and incarnate the law of the king in the various social relationships. A kingdom is a political arrangement of all parts of society as a distinctive social order at all levels, both individually and corporately. It is the same with the Kingdom of God. And the Bible makes it clear *how*

the Kingdom of God is to be governed and ordered, namely by means of the covenant that God has established with his people as their Lord and Saviour. God always relates to man by means of a covenant, and it is in the covenant that we find the details of how this kingdom is to be manifested as a distinctive social order, *how* God's people are to live as the Kingdom of God.

As believers, redeemed by Christ through his sacrificial death on our behalf, we are called *out of* the old world of sin and unbelief, i.e. the political orders of men, *into* a new political order, the Kingdom of God. Christians are not people who have been merely called out of the world of sin and unbelief. They have been called out of the world *into* something else, namely a new political order, *the Kingdom of God*. As citizens of the Kingdom of God our calling is to live out the prophetic message of the gospel both as individuals and as the new society, and thereby call the world to repentance. This prophetic message to the world is both verbal and practical. The new society in Christ should not only preach the word of God, but incarnate it in the new social order of the Kingdom, and when this happens the new society becomes a prophetic social order that calls the world to repentance and transforms the world by discipling the nations. This is our calling as believers. If we are to obey this calling faithfully we must put the Kingdom first in everything. Nothing takes priority over the Kingdom. Anything that usurps the priority of the Kingdom of God and his righteousness in our lives is an idol and dishonouring to God's name, even if, indeed *especially* if that idol is the Church, which, as John Owen declared, is the *greatest* idol that *ever* was in the world.⁵

So what should we do about this? Bear witness to this truth to all your family and friends and in the *Church* you attend; and to this end go to your pastor or minister and ask him to explain how the Church is to incarnate the Kingdom of God in her life as a social order, how she is to put the Kingdom of God first. Ask him to teach the covenant. Ask him to explain how we are to live according to the covenant and ask him to demonstrate this in his own life and the life of his family. Ask him to teach his Church members how they are to live as members of the Kingdom of God. And if he cannot or will not do these things, get rid of him, because he is a false prophet, a hireling, who will lead your Church, and probably has already led your Church, to compromise with the world and the inevitable defeat that this leads to.

Here are some practical issues that you can ask

5. John Owen, *An Enquiry into the Original, Nature, Institution, Powers, Order, and Communion of Evangelical Churches in Works* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust [Goold Edition, 1850–53], 1965), Vol. XV, p. 224f. See further <http://parekbasis.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/the-church.html>.

him to start explaining. First, how are the members of the Kingdom of God to organise the education of the young so that it conforms to God's will rather than conforming to the dictates of the religion of secular humanism? Second, how is the Kingdom's justice system to be organised so that it conforms to God's will rather than conforming to the dictates of the religion of secular humanism? Third, how should the Kingdom's welfare system be organised so that it conforms to God's will rather than conforming to the dictates of the religion of secular humanism? Fourth, how is the Kingdom's medical system to be organised so that it conforms to God's will rather than conforming to the dictates of the religion of secular humanism? The Bible gives directions for all these things, and it does not call us to be compromised with the world but rather to transform the world, to disciple the nations to Christ.

This is not the whole of it of course, but it is a start, and these are the things that Jesus prioritised and that the Bible prioritises. We are commanded to teach the good news of the Kingdom of God to all nations. We are commanded to pursue justice (God's righteousness). And the apostle Paul rebuked the Corinthian Christians for not establishing competent courts to deal with disputes between believers. We are told to care for our neighbours. And we are told to heal the sick. All these things receive a higher priority in the teachings of Jesus and the Bible than getting the Sunday morning Church services and rituals correct, and therefore they constitute the true *worship* that God requires of us. In fact the Bible does not prioritise the Sunday Church worship services at all, nor does it define worship as engaging in such services, and our prioritising of these things will achieve nothing in terms of the Great Commission. It is because the Church has put herself before the Kingdom of God that she is defeated before the world and compromised with it. Such compromise is caused by the idolatry involved in not prioritising what Jesus prioritised, which is the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. And the problem will not be resolved until the Church repents of this idolatry and does the works that God has called her to do instead of the works she wishes to do,—until she prioritises what the Lord has told her to prioritise and abandons her idolatry.

The Lord Jesus Christ came the first time as *Saviour* of the world to establish his *Kingdom* on earth. He will come again when the kingdoms of this world have become *his* Kingdom, but he will come then as *Judge* of the world (2 Tim. 4:1; 1 Pet. 4:5).

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