

The Gospel of the Kingdom

by G.H. Lang

John the Immerser preached a message of repentance, faith, and baptism, calling people to turn to God and receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Mark 1:4

Topics: "Kingdom Of God", "Repentance And Faith"

Description

G.H. Lang re-examines the preaching messages of John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and His apostles Peter, Paul, and John. John the Baptist's message focused on repentance and the nearness of the kingdom of heaven, emphasizing the need for a change of mind and baptism as a symbol of new life. He pointed people to have faith in Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away sin, highlighting the necessity of Christ's sacrificial death for the forgiveness of sins and entrance into God's kingdom. John also stressed the importance of producing good works as evidence of genuine repentance and renewal, anticipating a new society of believers gathered by Christ.

Transcript

The Message of its Five Chief Preachers : A re-examination

IN theology, as in any other science, we should avoid or escape from many serious errors were we more carefully to collate and to compare all the relevant facts before forming theories.

In these papers we wish to examine the statements of Holy Scripture regarding the subject matter of the preaching of John the Baptist, the Lord Jesus Christ, and His foremost messengers - the apostles, Peter, Paul, and John. Positively we may thus discern much illuminating truth, and incidentally we may detect some confusing errors.

I. JOHN THE IMMERSER

(1) The Kingdom. It must have been a mighty message given in mighty energy which could draw from their duties and pleasures into the deserts the vast masses and all classes of a whole country. Such it indeed was, its burden being this stupendous announcement: "Repent! for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near !" (Matt. 3. 2; etc.).

Some five centuries earlier, just when world dominion had passed from Israel's kings to Gentile sovereigns, the prophet Daniel had outlined to the first Gentile emperor the divinely foreseen course of

world history, and had declared that in the days of certain kings, to be ten in number, "the God of the heavens shall set up a kingdom . . . which shall stand for ever " (Daniel 2. 44). This was the culminating event to which all prophecy pointed; it became the ardent hope of true believers (Luke 1. 67-79; 2. 38; 23. 51); and naturally, the countryside was thrilled when one in the spirit and power of the great Elijah cried, "The kingdom of the heavens has drawn near"- for the use of this expression would recall to the hearers the well known phrase in Daniel. Its retention in the written record in the gospel narrative serves similarly to refer the reader to Daniel, and so it forms an illuminating verbal connection between the beginning of the New Testament and the Old Testament.

4 THE KINGDOM HAS DRAWN NEAR

But we may not assume that the masses of John's hearers understood his message correctly. They were as liable as we, though perhaps with more excuse, to read into it what they wished to hear, and to gather from his words what they did not say. It is for us to notice exactly what he did say and also what he did not say.

John did not announce that the time had arrived when the Stone cut out from the mountain without hands should break in pieces all world-powers, and establish by force a new universal and imperishable empire. Daniel foretold this, and this will most assuredly come to pass. But John did not declare this to be imminent or then possible. He could not have done so without exposing himself to the immediate and fatal retort that the ten kings were not present in whose days those events were to happen. Any such assertion would have destroyed his character as a prophet. World conditions in his time did not correspond to those required by prophecy. What he did announce was that the kingdom of the heavens had " drawn near." Here is to be observed the vital need that translation should be as strictly accurate as language can possibly admit. The rendering "the kingdom . . . is at hand" naturally raises the idea of it being near in point of time, but this is not contained of necessity in the word, and should not be introduced unless that be of necessity the sense, which here it is not. For other meanings being possible, this one is not the necessary meaning. Two kingdoms may be said to have drawn near to each other. when the sovereign of one visits the territory of another, for a kingdom is concentrated and represented in its king.

Again, a small state may cut itself out of an empire by rebelling and setting up its separate government. The empire may be said to have drawn near to such a state if the emperor should venture thereinto with an appeal for submission and an offer of pardon. And should any rebels accept such gracious overture, and return to their true allegiance, they would thus, morally and legally, have received the empire and have entered into it, though perchance continuing to reside on rebel territory. The statement of John demands no more fulfilment than this, and this strictly and fully corresponds to the historic facts. Through John, His ambassador and forerunner, and then in person, Jesus, the Sovereign of the Kingdom of the heavens, had drawn near to this rebel world with a call to repentance and an offer of pardon. Such as submitted to the call received the King (John 1. 12) and received the kingdom (Mark 10. 15), and thus to their vast advantage found that the kingdom had indeed drawn near. These would then await the day, near or distant, when the forces of the empire should suppress the rebellion, to the destruction of persistent rebels, and by power reincorporate the state into the empire. The waiting time in the midst of rebels from whom they had seceded would often be difficult and even dangerous, but the hope of the triumph of the empire would animate their hearts and guide their actions. But already, without the coming of that time, they would know that the empire had drawn near to them, that they had received it and were now in it, being subjects of its sovereign. Nothing further than as above is required to fulfil John's announcement; therefore nothing further should be read into it. It has been taught dogmatically that John

offered to Israel the immediate establishment of the visible kingdom in glory; that because Israel as a nation rejected the offer it was withdrawn; that thereupon another offer was substituted therefor: but these ideas do not arise from anything which John said or anybody else ever said, as will be apparent when we advance to what later preachers taught.

(2) Repentance. From the nature of John's message it followed that his first call was for repentance: "Repent ye, for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near." Repentance, as the Greek word shows, means a change of mind. This may or may not be accompanied by profound inward disturbance, by anguish of heart, emotional display. Its essence is that one accepts and acts upon a new view of matters.

Change your mind as to God and His divine rights and demands; as to your false, rebellious, self-opinionated attitude towards Him; as to the sin of independence of and animosity against Him. Adopt His view of the situation in place of your own; yield your own demands and consent to His terms; surrender your arms, cast yourself on His mercy; cease to do evil, learn to do well. Such was John's imperious, inflexible condition as preparation for that kingdom in which no sin is tolerated, in which unquestioning, undeviating obedience to the will of God is the law of life, the secret of bliss.

Such repentance is the necessary preliminary to entering the kingdom of God in any sense, present or future, for rebellion against a sovereign of necessity excludes from his kingdom.

(3) Baptism. It is further emphasized that John preached "the baptism of repentance" (Mark 1. 4). The term "to baptize" means to dip, to immerse. The plunging of the person beneath the water was a symbolic burial, as of one who had died, with a view to his resurrection into a new life. In this sense the act was already well known to Jews and to heathen. John called repenting sinners to acknowledge by this step that their former life was so wrong as to merit death, that they held themselves as in heart-intention dead to the former life, and that they desired henceforth to live in that new moral world of which John was the herald, the kingdom of the heavens. After death--never before--comes burial. None but the dead should be buried: all the dead should be. After burial comes resurrection, a walking in newness of life in a new world.

(4) Faith. As a faithful herald John directed the hearts of his hearers away from himself toward his Sovereign. Paul summarizes John's ministry thus: "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people that they should believe on Him that should come after him, that is, on Jesus" (Acts 19. 4). His message was, that entrance into the kingdom was by faith in Christ.

But never a hint did John give that if the people would receive Jesus as Messiah, the visible kingdom could forthwith be set up. In truth his message was exactly the contrary: "he seeth Jesus coming to him, and saith, Behold! the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world." And this he repeated, saying on the morrow, "Behold ! the Lamb of God" (John 1. 29, 36). The daily ritual of fifteen hundred years, the substitutionary death of millions of lambs, had taught the people that the lamb must die, its blood must be shed, ere any sinner could escape death and enter into life under the favour of the Holy One.

Thus from the beginning John taught that Jesus must die as the substitute of men in order that the sin of the world might be expiated. This was an entirely indispensable preliminary to this earth being incorporated into the kingdom of God at last, or to any individual entering that kingdom in present heart experience.

PARDON AND GOOD WORKS

The theory that the visible kingdom could be offered to Israel then and there without the sacrificial death of the Son of God, if only Israel had been willing, proposes what was a legal and moral impossibility. Divine law and sound morality demand that sin shall be punished, and law and morals be thus vindicated; and that this be effected through the punishment of a willing and worthy substitute if the actual culprits are to have opportunity of pardon and of entrance into the kingdom of God. The theory is, of course, flatly contradictory to the Old Testament Scriptures. It would have meant that Psalm 22, Isaiah 53, and all such passages, never would have found fulfilment - a sheer impossibility. John never could have made such a proposal without exposing himself to the condemnation of making void the whole sacrificial ritual of Moses, and the express and many declarations of the prophets that Messiah must suffer. In simple fact, it was upon Christ as the atoning Lamb that he called men to place their faith, obviously presupposing His death.

(5) Remission of sins. Upon the basis of the prefigured, and soon to be accomplished atonement, John proclaimed, what upon no other ground whatsoever would he have dared to declare, the forgiveness of sins:" he preached the baptism of repentance unto the remission of sins" (Mark 1. 4). Then, as. now, it was blessedly true of God that " He pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent and unfeignedly believe His holy gospel; "the genuineness of the repentance and confession being attested at the time by public submission to baptism.

(6) Evidential Works. John laid the heaviest possible stress upon the producing of proof of heart repentance and renewing by the doing of good works: "Bring forth therefore fruit worthy of repentance . . . Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance" (Matt. 3. 8: Luke 3. 8). He smashed with a blow all trust in godly parentage; "think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: "he insisted that each tree would be judged by its own fruit, and if this were not good the tree would be cut down and cast into the fire: he protested that the Coming One, to whom he directed men, would preserve only wheat, but burn up all chaff. (7) A New Society. This implied, in effect, that .Christ would in result gather a new society of men, composed of persons compared to trees bearing good fruit, to wheat.

(8) The Baptism in the Spirit.

Finally, John announced that the One of whom he spoke, standing unknown as yet in their midst, was He who should fulfil the ancient and rich promises of God, given through Ezekiel (36. 26, 27) and Joel (2. 28), and baptize such as believed on Him in the Holy Spirit. Thereby should be made inwardly effective and enduring that preliminary work of repentance and faith and holiness which it was John's high honour to begin by preaching and by baptizing in water, so preparing the way of the Lord Jesus.

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