

Conclusion: Recovering the Kingdom

We have studied how the kingdom of God became Christianity, how Jesus' message of the Father's presence devolved into one more form of religion.

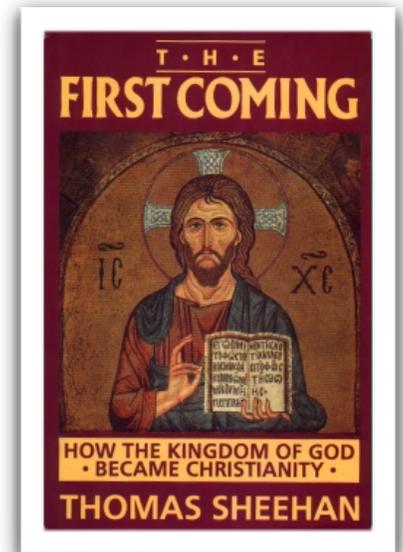
We saw how Jesus proclaimed the incarnation of God, the mystery of the heavenly Father coming to dwell among his people. And we saw how the disciples, by announcing the resurrection of Jesus and by generating various christologies, changed the prophet's radical message about God into a doctrine about Jesus himself.

The genesis of Christianity--the interpretation of Jesus as the savior--distorted the message of Jesus in three major ways.

First of all, Christianity hypostatized the kingdom. Whereas Jesus preached that God was arriving in the present-future, that is, in the enactment of justice and mercy, the church reified that living presence and narrowed it down to God's incarnation as and in one person, Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity's first sin was idolatry: It turned what Jesus was about into Jesus himself. It took the mystery he proclaimed--the utterly unfathomable mystery of God's disappearance into humankind--and reduced it to the Procrustean dimensions of the one who proclaimed it. By elaborating functional christologies initially and ontological christologies eventually, Christianity turned Jesus, in the phrase of the third-century theologian Origen, into *hê autobasileia*, the kingdom-of-God-in-person.[1]

Second, Christianity abandoned the prophet's radical sense of time. By interpreting Jesus as savior, the church surrendered the present-future--the only place where the Father henceforth would dwell--and in its place constructed the mythical past-present-future of a cosmic "salvation history," according to which God had become man in the past, was reigning in heaven at present, and would return to earth in the future. In so doing, Christianity lost the core of the prophet's message of forgiveness: that the future was already present--grace was everywhere--and therefore that the arrival of the heavenly Father was transformed into the praxis of earthly liberation.

Third, Christianity reconstituted religion. Jesus did not undertake his prophetic mission in order to bring people more religion (surely there was enough available already) or a different religion (Judaism was quite adequate, as religions go) or the true and perfect religion (which would be a contradiction in terms). Nor was his goal to reform the religion into which he was born. Rather, Jesus preached the end of religion and the beginning of what religion is supposed to be about: God's presence among men and women. And the paradox of the prophet's message was that God's presence meant God's disappearance--into his people. In a sense then, yes, it meant the death of God, his *kenôsis* or outpouring of himself. But Christianity, in place of God's reign with man (or rather, in the hope of realizing it), reintroduced religion in a variety of forms: apocalyptic eschatology (Jesus as



the future judge), messianic salvation (Jesus as the reigning Redeemer), and cosmic mythology (Jesus as the preexistent, incarnate, and exalted Son of God).

Paradoxically, to say that Christianity distorts the message of Jesus is not to say that it is wrong. Christianity is not a false interpretation but one possible interpretation of the meaning of the kingdom of God. And insofar as the Christian interpretation enables some people to live loving and meaningful lives, it is even "true," at least in the sense of making possible what the Greeks called *eu zôein*, "living well." But Christianity is certainly not the only interpretation of Jesus' message, and arguably not the best one.



I have suggested that in seizing upon Jesus, the church has missed what Jesus was about, that in elaborating her christological doctrines, she has covered over the mystery of the present-future. It is not that the church is at a loss for answers about Jesus; but maybe she has forgotten the question.

Can one recover the kingdom? Surely not in the sense of developing more precise christological answers to the question of who Jesus is in his divine self, or what Jesus does to save mankind. We will not recover the kingdom by fashioning a new Christ. Nor will we recover the kingdom by clinging to Jesus the way Simon did, and by making him--his particular words and deeds--into the absolute and sufficient law for everyday life. All such ways of clinging to Jesus are the very way to lose what he was about, for they take Jesus as an answer, whereas the point is to discover oneself as a question.

Perhaps one could begin to recover the kingdom by learning to ask the question that started things off in the beginning, the question about where one dwells. The focus now is on ourselves, not on Jesus. And in learning to do without Christ (that is, the Christian interpretation of Jesus) and even without Jesus (taken as the answer to anything), we may catch a glimpse of how to recover the question that Jesus was.

Where do we dwell? To be human means to be condemned to having the things of one's world not simply and directly (as supposedly God does) but only indirectly, that is, through interpretation. We dwell in our interpretations. In interpreting a phenomenon, we always take it as this or that, in terms of such and such a viewpoint. (For example, Jesus as God; or Jesus as merely a human being.) This means that we always understand things partially, inadequately, and with prejudice--in a word, through language rather than through a Godlike omniscient intuition. If "perfect truth" means perfect identification of our language with what we are talking about, then all our truths are fraught with falsehood, and all our taking of phenomena as this or that is also a mis-taking of them.

The interpretation of the kingdom of God that I have advanced in this book is certainly not traditional or orthodox. But what was just said about interpretation and the inevitability of mis-take raises the possibility that even the traditionally orthodox interpretation of the kingdom, which we call Christianity, is as much a heresy as is any "heretical" interpretation, including the one in this book.

In the broadest sense, heresy (from the Greek *hairêsis* taking, choosing, taking sides) is an essential constituent of all hermeneutics (in Greek *hermêneia*: interpretation, taking something as something). The history of Christianity through the centuries is, in fact, a history of its hermeneutical heresies, not just the heresies that the church has condemned and excluded, but also, and above all, the orthodox heresies, the acceptable takes / mis-takes that have come to constitute mainstream Christianity.

Thus, over against the heresy that is Christianity I propose another, one that consists in understanding the message of the kingdom of God without Christ and without Jesus:

- (1) "without Christ," that is, without interpretations that equate the kingdom of God with Christ's salvific acts (functional christology) and ultimately with his divine person (ontological christology);
- (2) "without Jesus," that is, not dismissing the prophet, but also not turning him into an idol. "Without Jesus" means without attributing to him any power beyond the natural, human power everyone has: that of being a culturally determined, historically relative interpreter of one's world and one's own life.

This means that for all the natural gifts and talents he once displayed, and regardless of whether one chooses to take him as a model for enacting the kingdom, Jesus is ultimately dispensable. He is not irreplaceable--in fact, he demands to be displaced so that one can get to what he is about. Jesus is not the object of the message he preached. The proclaimer of the kingdom gives way to the reality he proclaimed.

"The kingdom of God" is a language, an interpretation of human existence that was preached and lived by Jesus in the past and that can be reinterpreted and lived out by people today. The reinterpretation that I propose--recovering the kingdom without Christ or Jesus--entails taking the prophet at his word and as his word.

- (1) To hear Jesus' message of the kingdom of God "without Christ" and the Christian interpretation means to take Jesus at his word. This requires understanding what he said about eschatological forgiveness and its enactment in one's own life: "Live the present-future, for God has disappeared into justice and mercy" (cf. Mark 1:15). This most certainly entails not turning Jesus into the Christ or the Son of God or the kingdom incarnate or any other form of religion. Taking Jesus at his word means living God's eschatological future in and as the worldly task of human liberation, and doing this in a context where it is no longer possible or necessary to distinguish, as religion does, between nature and grace, between the worldly and the divine. The incarnation of God, his act of eschatological forgiveness, is what makes these distinctions impossible. In the postreligious dispensation that Jesus inaugurated, faith--that is, living the present-future--means maintaining the undecidability of what is human and what is divine. This is what the Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus, seems to be expressing when he writes:

When the righteous man searches for the nature of all things, he makes his own admirable discovery: that all is God's grace. ... Everything in the world, and the very world itself, manifests the blessings and generosity of God.[2]

(2) To hear the message of the kingdom of God "without Jesus," that is, without attributing to the prophet any unique or extraordinary powers, means to take Jesus as his word. That means cutting through the words and deeds in which Jesus preached the kingdom of God, in order to discover what gave rise to those acts and made them possible. Taking Jesus as his word means understanding that he is what everyone else is: a finite, fallible, mortal act of interpretation. Every human being is just that and no more: a hermeneusis, a lived interpretation (in action, in play, in language and thought) of what one's existence is and is about. Simply by living, one enacts such an interpretation and expresses it in the words of one's dialect, one's culture, one's moment in history.

Jesus summarized everything he understood about the world and mankind in the idiosyncratic and culturally determined words "**The kingdom of God is at hand.**" That phrase expressed, within the eschatological language of intertestamental Judaism, Jesus' vision of what human existence is: a **present prolepsis of the once-future God**, in a word, the incarnation.

Jesus' words, of course, are an interpretation that requires yet further interpretation, and so on ad infinitum. But in all these efforts at understanding the message of his kingdom of God, the point is to see the inevitability of interpretation, that is, to see that what makes us be human is our inexorable finitude, which condemns us to being acts of indirection and mediation, where all is "hints and guesses / Hints followed by guesses." [3] If, as we suggested above, living the kingdom means maintaining undecidability (the impossibility of distinguishing the worldly from the divine), then human existence itself, as an act of interpretation, is the enactment of undecidability. We are the inevitability of taking and mis-taking ourselves and the world as this or that; we are the inevitability of heresy. That is to say: All of us, including Jesus, are inevitably and forever a question to which there is no answer. Taking Jesus as his word means understanding and accepting that. Therefore, yes: The message of the kingdom of God is about Jesus of Nazareth--but only insofar as it is about every man and woman.

Recovering the kingdom "without Christ"--that would mean getting to what Jesus said: the present-future, the incarnation. Recovering the kingdom "without Jesus"--that would mean getting to what Jesus was: a hermeneut, a heretic, that is, a human being. The point in recovering the kingdom is to recover oneself as the place of the mystery of the present-future, and thus as one called to enact liberation.

We are brought back full circle to where we started. The crisis Christianity faces today is not sociological or administrative; it has little to do with the otherwise important facts that family life and sexual morality are in revolution, that church attendance and clerical vocations are decreasing, that women are demanding their rightful place in a heretofore masculine church. Christianity will survive all such crises by reshaping its outer form, as it has repeatedly done over the last twenty centuries. The major decision Christianity faces today is not how it might continue as before, or even how it might reform itself so as to return to its origins, to the surety of Simon's vision, to the pristine power of his Easter experience. No, **the decision is whether or not Christianity can dissolve itself in order to become what it is about.**

The crisis in Christianity is about its origins, its founding story, but not in the sense that its doctrines have been found to be myths (all religious doctrines are mythical) or to be totally lacking in truth (they are presumably as true, and as false, as any other decent religion's) or that they have no more meaning in the sophisticated modern world. Rather, the crisis is that at last Christianity is discovering what it always was about: not God or Christ or Jesus of Nazareth, but the endless, unresolvable mystery inscribed at the heart of being human. This is a chastening insight, but a salutary one, fraught with new possibilities for recovering the radically original impulse behind Jesus' preaching.

The prophet announced that the time had come (Mark 1:15), that the beginning of the end of religion was at hand. Since then, the church has wrestled with the challenge of putting herself out of business the way Jesus himself did: in the name of God's incarnation. That means learning to live at the uncertain point that is the present-future, without appeal to any "beyond." It is there, in the present-future, that all the reified and self-perpetuating structures of religion dissolve into what they were supposed to be about this is the kingdom's "protestant" moment of calling faith back to its origins. But there too the "catholic" moment, when one discovers the simple, universal meaning of those origins. It is the same message that Jesus preached when he came back to Galilee after his baptism in the Jordan:

**Grace is and always has been everywhere.
The task is to make it so.**