

## Still Close at Hand

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In Elwyn Smith's excellent novelization of the Gospels, Jesus says, "If men are to enter the kingdom of God, they must repent. It cuts them to the heart to confess that they have forgotten God and His righteousness. They hate [Me] for teaching them the truth about themselves." (*Men Called Him Master*, p. 44) Though this particular wording is not found in the Gospels, it readily conveys the truth given by John: "Light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." (Jn. 3:19)

After John the Baptist was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe the good news." (Mk. 1:14-15) When Jesus sent out the seventy, whether a town welcomed them or not, the message was to be given: "The kingdom of God has come near to you." (Lk. 10:8-11) The apostles equally proclaimed the things of the kingdom of God. (Acts 8:12, 19:8, etc.) But after two thousand years of church history, traditions and hierarchies of men and all manner of folly and wisdom, spirituality and carnality practiced in the name of Christ and God, it is difficult to recognize that the original proclamation is still true – the kingdom of God is still close at hand. And not only is it still a truth, it is the foremost remedy for the vast majority of the ills of modern churchianity and, as such, pressing into this truth will be fiercely resisted by the enemy of our souls.

Jesus almost never spoke of the ekklesia (see Mt. 16:18 and 18:17 for the only recorded times that He did) but rather He proclaimed the kingdom of God. However it was the ekklesia and subsequently the "church" which came into being and prominence. The kingdom of God is that realm where Christ is actually obeyed and the will of God is performed. (Mt. 6:10) The ekklesia is Christ's *people* who have been called out of this world's darkness to attend to the affairs and issues of Christ's kingdom in their own locale and sphere of influence. The "church" is that outwardly organized hierarchy built on "delegated authority" (Nicolaianism – Rev. 2:6, 15) and traditions of men that counterfeits, distorts and supplants the role and functions of the bride and body of Christ. The history behind the devolvement of the ekklesia, which originally held a genuine place and truly served the kingdom of God, and the subsequent emergence of the counterfeit and deteriorating "church," is beyond the current discussion but is the basis upon which a clearer understanding of church history is to be obtained.

Man does not like to be told that he is evil and destined to be judged by an absolutely holy and righteous God. Religious man – those steeped in and confident of, whether overtly or covertly or even in sheer ignorance, their own goodness and righteousness – is especially offended at the notion that his very nature is evil and that holy God commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30), to change their minds about themselves and their need for a Savior and to turn their life from the pursuit of self's agendas and toward the will of God. Jesus' retort, "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Mt. 9:13), is a jab at all who think they have some innate goodness within. Those who think themselves "good" or even "good enough" or "as good as anyone else" are offended that Jesus requires them to recognize themselves as sinners who deserve to spend eternity in hell. Those who have realized their own wretchedness are overjoyed to find Jesus as their Savior but those who refuse to come into the light to see how evil they really are reject Christ as their Savior and Messiah.

Though this truth is most readily seen in the context of receiving Christ as Savior, it is equally relevant in submitting to Christ as King and Lord over every aspect of one's life. The

one who does not recognize his own self-centeredness or who continues in lawlessness (doing what is right in his own eyes – Jdgs. 21:25), sees no need for any other to be the king and ruler of his life. Those who are quite satisfied with the course and output of their life – those content in their wealth or careers or lifestyles – see no reason to submit and surrender to a king. Religious men – content with their weekly visits to the “Christian” temple and with their weekly deposits to conciliate the “God” who demands a tithe and offerings to overlook their sin – will actually deride and dismiss and oppress and even persecute those who dare to suggest that eternal salvation is in any way connected to one’s obedience to Christ and God. Such a thing would be “self-effort” or a “return to law” as a means of being saved! (see however Heb. 5:9)

Jesus clearly warned His followers that repentance was key: “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” (Lk. 13:5) To repent is more than a change of mind. John preached, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Mt. 3:8) and Paul preached to the Gentiles “that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.” (Acts 26:20) After listing the fruit that appears as a result of living one’s life in obedience to the Spirit of God – “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” – Paul concludes, “Against such things there is no law.” (Gal. 5:22-23) Repentance is to lead to faith and faith is to lead to obedience that leads to holiness and love in Christ Jesus. Any other religious or “spiritual” course is mere deception.

The writer of Hebrews wrote, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is still called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end.” (Heb. 3:12-14) The “church,” that expression of the apostasy, the great falling away from the faith (Mt. 24:10, 2 Ths. 2:3), has promoted teachings (“doctrines”) that comfort their passive listeners in their fallen, sinful, disobedient, lawless and even rebellious lifestyles, promising eternal life and rewards to those who will simply “believe.” These have become “hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13) because, instead of truly repenting of the evil that is in their heart, they have instead obeyed that evil, departed from the living God and returned to whatever religious system, program or “theology” that appeals to their religious flesh.

We may not like to hear that there is no good thing within our flesh (Rom. 7:18) and it may take many years before we can echo Paul, “O wretched man that I am!” (Rom. 7:24) but the sooner we can honestly recognize this as truth, the closer we are to being able to surrender to Christ as Savior and King.

The call to repent because the kingdom of God is close at hand is still sounding because man is still wicked and sinful. Holy God is still extending His effort of mercy and reconciliation through the crucified and resurrected King Christ Jesus. Though centuries of “church” traditions have obscured the simplicity of this good news, the gospel of the kingdom is again being preached as a witness to all peoples because the end of this age is upon us. (see Mt. 24:14) The time to recognize the truth about ourselves and embrace the truth and Lordship of Christ Jesus over our lives is now, while it is still called “Today.” The day when all facades and deceptions will prove inadequate and only those who have done the will of God will be welcomed into God’s eternal kingdom (Mt. 7:21) is imminent.

Repent. Be changed. Produce actions and attitudes that prove that God is at work in you. Serve the King and the family (people) of Christ and God. Cease from deceptive religious “Christian” practices that keep these things from becoming realities in your life, even “Bible study,” if necessary. Being able to answer Bible trivia questions will not serve you well on

judgment day if the needs of the orphans, widows and the least of Christ's brothers whom God placed in your life went unmet! (Jas. 1:27, Mt. 25:40, 45) Follow the Lamb where He leads you. (Rev. 14:4) Anything else is mere deception, mere "church," designed to keep you from entering, experiencing and inheriting the kingdom of God. (see Eph. 5:5-6, 1 Cor. 6:9-10, Gal. 5:21)

Let he who has ears hear.

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