

PASTOR'S NOTES. Kingdom Thoughts, part 4.

This might be the last of these articles about how Christians historically misunderstood the message of Jesus about the Kingdom of God. After the year 313, when the Roman Emperor became Christian and allowed Christianity to be tolerated in the Roman world, a series of synods or Councils took place to try to refine the doctrines of the Church. The Roman Catholic church, the Eastern Orthodox church, and many Protestant churches agree on 7 Councils as speaking for the whole church: The first at Nicaea (325), the first at Constantinople (381), the first at Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), the second at Constantinople (553), the third at Constantinople (680), and the second at Nicaea (787). But in between, there was another, which was later removed from the list:

In the year 449, the leading Fathers of the Christian church met in Ephesus, in Asia Minor, to debate pressing theological issues. At a critical moment, a band of monks and soldiers took control of the meeting hall, forcing bishops to sign a blank paper on which the winning side later filled in its own favored statement. The document targeted the patriarch of Constantinople, Flavian, one of the three or four greatest clerics in the Christian world. Yelling "Slaughter him!" a mob of monks attacked Flavian, beating him so badly that he died a few days later. So outrageous was the intimidation that the ultimate winners in the conflict invalidated this whole council. They repudiated it as a *Latrocinium* – loosely, a Gangster Synod.

Philip Jenkins, *Jesus Wars*, page 1 (HarperOne, 2010).

And you thought your church meetings were bad! But while this second council at Ephesus clearly went out of control, the records tell us that even the 7 other councils were marked by shouting, deliberately misrepresenting other points of view, and trying all kinds of tricks to prevent others from being seated at the meeting. The stakes were high; because the Emperor wanted peace, they believed that an official decision was necessary to settle these issues, and whoever lost the "vote" would have to change their position or face exile, prison, or even death.

The main points of contention had to do with how the humanity and the divinity of Christ were supposed to mix: some believed that Christ had two natures: a human and a divine, while some believed Christ had a single divine nature. Both sides were determined that the other was either trying to deny the divinity of Christ, or His full humanity. As an observer from many years later, it seems to me that the people of the time had very particular assumptions of what it meant to be divine that are beyond what any of us could know; they thought they could understand the nature of the almighty God. But my reason for bringing all of this up is that while it seemed like an important issue, it was a distraction from what Jesus had been here to proclaim: the kingdom of God.

*So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."*

Mark 10:42-45 (NRSV)

This kingdom of service that Jesus spoke about throughout His earthly ministry is a *kingdom not of this world*... we have usually understood this to be a kingdom just like the ones we know – with a King, and where the powerful force their will upon others – except that it is from some place other than this planet. But maybe what Jesus meant was that His kingdom is a whole different type of thing than anything on this planet. That is why it does not come by fighting and war and force:

*Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If My kingdom were from this world, My followers would be fighting to keep Me from being handed over to the Jews.*

*But as it is, My kingdom is not from here.”*

*Pilate asked Him, “So You are a king?”*

*Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to My voice.”*

John 18:36-37 (NRSV)

It appears that many of the earliest Christians got this idea of being servant to all; but once people with power became Christian, it became far easier to force people into doing what’s right. Even now it seems crazy that being a servant would ever lead to making the world better. Yet in its first three centuries Christianity grew throughout the Middle East and Europe, and began to make inroads into Africa and East Asia. In places of intense persecution, while sometimes entire Christian populations had been eliminated, such as in Japan in the 1600s, there was also immense growth in other areas. In Angola in the 1980s, with all the church buildings destroyed and the ordained pastors killed or removed, the number of Christians increased ten times.

The last two thousand years have been mostly about nations fighting nations, all trying to control as much as they can. Most of these used the name of Christ, but without the kingdom message for which He came. In each of these last four articles, I find myself asking the same questions: Is it any wonder why people on the outside had trouble telling the difference between Christians and others? Or why people have argued that religion is the cause of war and death through history? And is it any wonder why people have failed to see how uniquely different Jesus is to everyone else?

So to me this makes our task all the more important. We truly have something unique to offer the world, and it has been there all along. But it is has never been easy for any of us to do this without resorting to force. So we need prayer and we need each other. Maybe this is why our authentic faith seems to grow more in the rough times – then we know it’s not easy, we know we need each other, we know we need prayer...

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'R. A.', written in a cursive style.