

The Nature of the Kingdom, or Church, of Christ

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Anglican · Post-Reformation · Sermon

STROMATA 170

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INTRODUCTION

Preached before the king in 1717, this sermon lit the fuse on the Bangorian Controversy, the loudest theological argument of Georgian England, it got the Convocation of the Church of England suspended for over a century. Hoadly's claim was simple and incendiary: Christ's kingdom is not of this world, so no earthly authority, including the church's own bishops, can bind a Christian's conscience in matters of salvation. Coming from a sitting bishop, it read as an attack on the very office he held. The pamphlet war it triggered ran for years and drew in most of the significant theological minds of the period. Expect a short, plainly argued text whose real weight is in what it set in motion, not its length.

Jesus answered, My Kingdom is not of this World.

John, 18:36.

One of those great Effects, which length of Time is seen to bring along with it, is the Alteration of the Meaning annexed to certain Sounds. The Signification of a Word, well known and understood by Those who first made use of it, is very insensibly varied, by passing thrô many Mouths, and by being taken and given by Multitudes, in common Discourse; till it often comes to stand for a Complication of Notions, as distant from the original Intention of it, nay, as contradictory to it, as Darkness is to Light. The Ignorance and Weakness of Some, and the Passions and Bad Designs of Others, are the great Instruments of this Evil: which, even when it seems to affect only indifferent Matters, ought in reason to be opposed, as it tends in it's nature to confound Men's Notions in weightier Points; but, when it hath once invaded the most Sacred and Important Subjects, ought, in Duty, to be refitted with a more open and undisguised Zeal, as what toucheth the very Vitals of all that is good, and is just going to take from Men's Eyes the Boundaries of Right and Wrong.

The only Cure for this Evil, in Cases of so great Concern, is to have recourse to the Originals of Things: to the Law of Reason, in those Points which can be traced back thither; and to the Declarations of Jesus Christ, and his immediate Followers, in such Matters, as took their Rise solely from those Declarations. For the Case is plainly this, that Words and Sounds have had such an Effect, (not upon the Nature of Things, which is unmoveable, but) upon the Minds of Men in thinking of them; that the very same Word remaining, (which at first truly represented One certain Thing,) by having Multitudes of new

inconsistent Ideas, in every Age, and every Year, added to it, becomes it self the greatest Hindrance to the true undemanding of the Nature of the Thing first intended by it.

For Instance, Religion, in St. James's Days, was Virtue and Integrity, as to our selves, and Charity and Beneficence to others; before God, even the Father. Ja. i. 27. By Degrees, it is come to signify, in most of the Countries throughout the whole World, the Performance of every thing almost, except Virtue and Charity; and particularly, a punctual Exactness in a Regard to particular Times, Places, Forms, and Modes, diversified according to the various Humours of Men; recommended and practised under the avowed Name of External Religion: Two Words, which, in the Sense fix'd upon them by many Christians, God hath put asunder; and which therefore, no Man should join together. And accordingly, the Notion of a Religious Man differs in every Country, just as much as Times, Places, Ceremonies, Imaginary Austerities, and all other Outward Circumstances, are different and various: Whereas in truth, thô a Man, truly Religious in other Respects, may make use of such Things; yet, they cannot be the least part of his Religion, properly so call'd, any more than his Food, or his Raiment, or any other Circumstance of his Life.

Thus likewise, the Worship of God, to be paid by Christians, was in our Saviour's time, and in his own plain Words, the Worship of the Father in Spirit and Truth; and this declared to be one great End proposed in the Christian Dispensation: The Hour cometh, and now is, when the true Worshipers shall Worship the Father in Spirit and in Truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. John iv. 23. But the Notion of it is become quite another thing; and in many Christian Countries, that which still retains the Name of the Worship of God, is indeed the Neglect, and the Diminution of the Father; and the Worship of other Beings besides, and more than, the Father. And this, performed in such a manner, as that any indifferent Spectator would conclude, that neither the Consciences nor Understandings of Men, neither Spirit nor Truth, were at all concerned in the Matter; or rather, that they had been banish'd from it by an express Command. In the mean time the Word, or Sound, still remains the same in Discourse. The whole Lump of indigested, and inconsistent Notions and Practices; Every thing that is solemnly said, or done, when the Worship of God is profess'd, is equally cover'd under that general Name; and, by the help of using the same Original Word, passeth easily for the Thing it self. Again,

Prayer, in all our Lord's Directions about it, and particularly in that Form, which He himself taught his Followers, was a calm, undisturbed, Address to God, under the Notion of a Father, expressing those Sentiments and Wishes before Him, which every sincere Mind ought to have. But the same Word, by the help of Men, and voluminous Rules of Art, is come to signify Heat and Flame, in such a manner, and to such a degree, that a Man may be in the best Disposition in the World, and yet not be devout enough to Pray: and many an honest Person hath been perplex'd, by this Means, with Doubts and Fears of being incapable of Praying, for want of an intenseness of Heat, which hath no more relation to the Duty, than a Man's being in a Fever hath, to the Sincerity of his Professions, or Addresses to any Earthly Prince.

Once more, the Love of God, and of our Saviour, was at first, in his own Words, and those of St. John, many times repeated, the keeping his Commandments, or doing his Will. Joh. 14. 15, 21, 23. ch. 15. 10. 1 Joh. 2. 5. ch. 5. 3. II Joh. 6. But the Notion of it was, it seems, left very jejune; and so hath been

improved by his later Followers, till the same Name, still kept up in the Language of Christians, is far removed from the Thing principally and first intended; and is come by degrees to signify a violent Passion, Commotion, and Ecstasy, venting it self in such sort of Expressions and Disorders, as other Passions do: and this regulated and defined, by such a Variety of Imaginations, that an ordinary Christian, with the utmost Sincerity in his Heart, is filled with nothing but eternal Suspicions, Doubts, and Perplexities, whether he hath any thing of the true Love of God, or not.

I have mentioned these particulars, not only to shew the Evil it self; and to how great a Degree the Nature of Things hath suffered in the Opinions of Men, by the Alteration of the Sense of the same Words and Sounds: but to give you Occasion to observe, that there can be no Cure for it, in Christians, but to go back to the New Testament it self; because there alone we shall find the Original Intention of such Words; or the Nature of the Things design'd to be signified by them, declared and fixed by our Lord, or his Apostles from him, by some such Marks, as may, if we will attend to them, guide and guard us in our Notions of those Matters, in which we are most of all concern'd.

It is with this View, that I have chosen those Words, in which our Lord himself declared the Nature of his own Kingdom. This Kingdom of Christ, is the same with the Church of Christ. And the Notion of the Church of Christ, which, at first, was only the Number, small or great, of Those who believed Him to be the Messiah; or of Those who subjected themselves to Him, as their King, in the Affair of Religion; having since that Time been so diversified by the various Alterations it hath undergone, that it is almost impossible so much as to number up the many inconsistent Images that have come, by daily Additions, to be united together in it: nothing, I think, can be more useful, than to consider the same thing, under some other Image, which hath not been so much used; nor consequently so much defaced. And since the Image of His Kingdom, is That, under which our Lord himself chose to represent it: We may be sure that, if we sincerely examine our Notion of his Church, by what He saith of his Kingdom, that it is not of this World, we shall exclude out of it, every thing that he would have excluded; and then, what remains will be true, pure, and uncorrupted. And what I have to say, in order to this, will be comprehended under Two General Heads.

I. As the Church of Christ is the Kingdom of Christ, He himself is King: and in this it is implied, that He is himself the sole Law-giver to his Subjects, and himself the sole Judge of their Behaviour, in the Affairs of Conscience and Eternal Salvation. And in this Sense therefore, His Kingdom is not of this World; that He hath, in those Points, left behind Him, no visible, humane Authority; no Vicegerents, who can be said properly to supply his Place; no Interpreters, upon whom his Subjects are absolutely to depend; no Judges over the Consciences or Religion of his People. For if this were so, that any such absolute Vicegerent Authority, either for the making new Laws, or interpreting Old Ones, or judging his Subjects, in Religious Matters, were lodged in any Men upon Earth; the Consequence would be, that what still retains the Name of the Church of Christ, would not be the Kingdom of Christ, but the Kingdom of those Men, vested with such Authority. For, whoever hath such an Authority of making Laws, is so far a King: and whoever can add new Laws to those of Christ, equally obligatory, is as truly a King, as Christ himself is: Nay, whoever hath an absolute Authority to interpret any written, or spoken Laws; it is He, who is truly the Law-giver, to all Intents and Purposes; and not the Person who first wrote, or spoke them.

In humane Society, the Interpretation of Laws may, of necessity, be lodged, in some Cases, in the Hands of Those who were not originally the Legislators. But this is not absolute; nor of bad Consequence to Society: because the Legislators can resume the Interpretation into their own Hands, as they are Witnesses to what passes in the World; and as They can, and will, sensibly interpose in all those Cases, in which their Interposition becomes necessary. And therefore, They are still properly the Legislators. But it is otherwise in Religion, or the Kingdom of Christ. He himself never interposeth, since his first Promulgation of his Law, either to convey Infallibility to Such as pretend to handle it over again; or to assert the true Interpretation of it, amidst the various and contradictory Opinions of Men about it. If He did certainly thus interpose, He himself would still be the Legislator. But, as He doth not; if such an absolute Authority be once lodged with Men, under the Notion of Interpreters, They then become the Legislators, and not Christ; and They rule in their own Kingdom, and not in His.

It is the same thing, as to Rewards and Punishments, to carry forward the great End of his Kingdom. If any Men upon Earth have a Right to add to the Sanctions of his Laws; that is, to increase the Number, or alter the Nature, of the Rewards and Punishments of his Subjects, in Matters of Conscience, or Salvation: They are so far Kings in his stead; and Reign in their own Kingdom, and not in His. So it is, whenever They erect Tribunals, and exercise a Judgment over the Conferences of Men; and assume to Themselves the Determination of such Points, as cannot be determined, but by One who knows the Hearts; or, when They make any of their own Declarations, or Decisions, to concern and affect the State of Christ's Subjects, with regard to the Favour of God: this is so far, the taking Christ's Kingdom out of His Hands, and placing it in their own.

Nor is this matter at all made better by their declaring Themselves to be Vicegerents, or Law makers, or Judges, under Christ, in order to carry on the Ends of his Kingdom. For it comes to this at last, since it doth not seem fit to Christ himself to interpose so as to prevent or remedy all their mistakes and contradictions, that, if They have this power of interpreting, or adding, Laws, and judging Men, in such a sense, that Christians shall be indispensably and absolutely obliged to obey those Laws, and to submit to those Decisions; I say, if They have this power lodged with them, then the Kingdom, in which they rule, is not the Kingdom of Christ, but of Themselves; He doth not rule in it, but They: And, whether They happen to agree with him, or to differ from Him, as long as they are the Law-givers, and Judges, without any Interposition from Christ, either to guide or correct their Decisions, They are Kings of this Kingdom, and not Christ Jesus.

If therefore, the Church of Christ be the Kingdom of Christ; it is essential to it, that Christ himself be the Sole Law-giver, and Sole Judge of his Subjects, in all points relating to the favour or displeasure of Almighty God; and that All His Subjects, in what Station soever they may be, are equally Subjects to Him; and that No One of them, any more than Another, hath Authority, either to make New Laws for Christ's Subjects; or to impose a sense upon the Old Ones, which is the same thing; or to Judge, Censure, or Punish, the Servants of Another Master, in matters relating purely to Conscience, or Salvation. If any Person hath any other Notion, either thro' a long Use of Words with Inconsistent Meanings, or thro' a negligence of Thought; let him but ask himself, whether the Church of Christ be the Kingdom of Christ, or not: And, if it be, whether this Notion of it doth not absolutely exclude all other Legislators and Judges, in matters relating to Conscience, or the favour of God; or, whether it can be His Kingdom, if any Mortal Man hath such a Power of Legislation and Judgment in it. This Enquiry will bring Us back to the first, which is the only True, Account of the Church of Christ, or the Kingdom of Christ, in the mouth of a Christian: That it is the Number of Men, whether Small or Great, whether Dispersed or united, who truly and sincerely are Subjects to Jesus Christ alone, as their Law-giver and Judge, in matters relating to the Favour of God, and their Eternal Salvation.

II. The next principal point is, that, if the Church be the Kingdom of Christ; and this Kingdom be not of this World: this must appear from the Nature and End of the Laws of Christ, and of those Rewards and Punishments, which are the Sanctions of his Laws. Now his Laws are Declarations, relating to the Favour of God in another State after this. They are Declarations of those Conditions to be perform'd, in this World, on our part, without which God will not make us Happy in that to come. And they are almost All general Appeals to the Will of that God; to his Nature, known by the Common Reason of Mankind;

and so the imitation of that Nature, which must be our Perfection. The Keeping his commandments is declared the Way to Life; and the doing his Will, the Entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven. The being Subjects to Christ, is to this very End, that We may the better and more effectually perform the Will of God, The Laws of this Kingdom, therefore, as Christ left them, have nothing of this World in their view; no Tendency, either to the Exaltation of Some, in worldly pomp and dignity; or to their absolute Dominion over the Faith and Religious conduct of Others of his Subjects; or «to the erecting of any sort of Temporal Kingdom, under the Covert and Name of a Spiritual one.

The Sanctions of Christ's Law are Rewards and Punishments. But of what sort? Not the Rewards of this World; not the Offices, or Glories, of this State; not the pains of Prisons, Banishments, Fines, or any lesser and more Moderate Penalties; nay, not the much lesser Negative Discouragements that belong to Humane Society. He was far from thinking that These could be the Instruments of such a Perswasion, as He thought acceptable to God. But, as the Great End of his Kingdom, was to guide Men to Happiness, after the short Images of it were over here below; so, He took his Motives from that place, where His Kingdom first began, and where it was at last to end; from those Rewards and Punishments in a future State, which had no relation to this World: And, to shew that his Kingdom was not of this World, all the Sanctions which He thought fit to give to His Laws, were not of this World at all.

St. Paul understood this so well, that He gives an Account of His own Conduct, and that of Others in the same Station, in these words, Knowing the terrors of the Lord, we perswade men: whereas, in too many Christian Countries, since his days, if Some, who profess to succeed Him, were to give an Account of their own Conduct, it must be in a quite contrary strain; Knowing the terrors of this World, and having them in our power, We do, not perswade men, but force their outward Profession against their inward Perswasion.

Now, wherever this is practis'd, whether in a great degree, or a small, in that place there is so far a Change, from a Kingdom which is not of this world, to a Kingdom which is of this world. As soon as ever you hear of any of the Engines of this world, whether of the greater, or the lesser sort, you must immediately think that then, and so far, the Kingdom of this world takes place. For, if the very Essence of God's worship be Spirit and Truth; If Religion be Virtue and Charity, under the Belief of a Supreme Governour and Judge; if True Real Faith cannot be the effect of Force; and, if there can be no Reward where there is no Willing Choice: then, in all, or any of these Cases, to apply Force or Flattery, Worldly pleasure or pain; is to act contrary to the Interests of True Religion, as it is plainly opposite to the Maxims upon which Christ founded his Kingdom; who chose the Motives which are not of this world, to support a Kingdom which is not of this world. And indeed, it is too visible to be hid, that wherever the Rewards and Punishments are changed, from future to present, from the World to come, to the World now in possession; there, the Kingdom founded by our Saviour is, in the Nature of it, so far changed, that it is become, in such a degree, what He professed, His Kingdom was not: that is, of this world; of the same sort with other Common Earthly Kingdoms, in which the Rewards are, Worldly Honours, Posts, Offices, Pomp, Attendance, Dominion; and the Punishments are, Prisons, Fines, Banishments, Gallies and Racks; or something Less, of the same sort.

If these can be the true supports of a Kingdom which is not of this World; then Sincerity, and Hypocrisy; Religion, and No Religion; Force, and Perswasion; A Willing Choice, and a Terrified Heart; are become the same things: Truth and Falshood stand in need of the same methods, to propagate. and support them; and our Saviour himself was little acquainted with the Right way of increasing the Number of such Subjects, as He wished for. If He had but at first enlightened the Powers of this World, as He did St. Paul; and employed the Sword which They bore, and the Favours They had in their hands, to bring Subjects into his Kingdom; this had been an Expeditions and an effectual way, according to the Conduct of some of his professed Followers, to have had a Glorious and Extensive Kingdom, or Church. But this was not his Design; unless it could be compassed in quite a different way.

And therefore, when You see Our Lord, in his methods, so far removed from Those of Many of his Disciples; when You read Nothing, in his Doctrine about his own Kingdom, of taking in the Concerns of this World, and mixing them with those of Eternity; no Commands that the Frowns and Discouragements of this present State mould in any Cafe attend upon: Conscience and Religion; No Rules against the Enquiry of All His Subjects into his Original Message from ffeaven; no Orders for the kind and charitable force of Penalties, or Capital Punshments, to make Men think and chuse aright; no Calling upon the secular Arm, whenever the Magistrate mould become Christian, to inforce his Doctrines, or to back his Spiritual Authority; but, on the contrary, as plain a Declaration as a few Words can make, that His Kingdom is not of this World: I say, when You see this, from the whole Tenor of the Gospel, so vastly opposite to Many who take his Name into their Mouths, the Question with you ought to be, Whether He did not know the Nature of his own Kingdom, or Church, better than Any since his Time? whether you can suppose, He left any such matters to be decided against Himself, and his own Express professions; and, whether if an Angel from Heaven should give you any Account of his Kingdom, contrary to what He himself hath done, it can be of any Weight, or Authority, with Christians

I have now made some such observations; drawn from the Church being the Kingdom of Christ, and not of any Men in that Kingdom; from the Nature of his Laws, and from those Rewards and Punishments, which are the Sanctions of those Laws; as lead us naturally into the true Notion of the Church, or Kingdom, of Christ, by excluding out of it every thing inconsistent with His being King, Law-giver and Judge; as well as with the Nature of His Laws, and of His promises and Threatnings. I will only make Two or Three Observations, grounded upon this: And so conclude. And

- From what hath been said it is very plain, in general, that the Grossest Mistakes in Judgment, about the Nature of Christ's Kingdom, or Church, have arisen from hence, that Men have argued from Other visible Societies, and Other Visible Kingdoms of this World, to what ought to be Visible, and Sensible, in His Kingdom: Constantly leaving out of their Notion, the most Essential Part of it, that Christ is King in his own Kingdom; for getting this King himself, because He is not now seen by mortal Eyes; and Substituting Others in his Place, as Law-givers and Judges, in the same Points, in which He must either Alone, or not at all, be Law-giver and Judge; not contented with such a Kingdom as He established, and desires to reign in; but urging and contending, that His Kingdom must be like Other Kingdoms, Whereas He hath positively warn'd them against any such Arguings, by assuring Them that this Kingdom is His Kingdom, and that .it is not of this World; and therefore that No one of His Subjects is Law-giver and Judge over Others of them,

in matters relating to Salvation, but He alone; and that We must not Frame our Ideas from the Kingdoms of this World, of what ought to be, in a visible and feasible manner, in His Kingdom.

- From what hath been said it appears that the Kingdom of Christ, which is the Church of Christ, is the Number of Persons who are Sincerely, and Willingly, Subjects to Him, as Law-giver and Judge, in all matters truly relating to Conscience, or Eternal Salvation. And the more close and immediate this Regard to Him is, the more certainly and the more evidently true it is, that They are of his Kingdom. This may appear fully to their own Satisfaction, if They have recourse to Him himself, in the Gospel; if They think it a sufficient Authority that He hath declared the Conditions of their Salvation, and that No Man upon Earth hath any Authority to declare any other, or to add one tittle to them; if They resolve to perform what They see, He saith a stress upon; and if They trust no mortal, with the absolute direction of their Consciences, the pardon of their Sins, or the determining of their Interest in God's favour; but wait for their Judge, who alone can bring to light the hidden things of darkness.

If They feel themselves disposed and resolved to receive the Words of Eternal Life from Himself; to take their Faith from what He himself once delivered, who knew better than All the rest of the World what He required of his own Subjects; to direct their Worship by his Rule, and their whole practice by the General Law which He laid down: If They feel themselves in this disposition, They may be very certain that They are truly his Subjects, and Members of his Kingdom. Nor need They envy the Happiness of Others, who may think it a much more evident Mark of their belonging to the Kingdom of Christ, that They have other Law-givers, and Judges, in Christ's Religion, besides Jesus Christ; that They have recourse not to his own Words, but the Words of Others who profess to interpret them; that They are ready to Submit to this Interpretation, let it be what it will; that They have set up to Themselves the Idol of an unintelligible Authority, both in Belief, and Worship, and Practice; in Words, under Jesus Christ; but in deed and in truth over Him; as it removes the minds of his Subjects from Himself, to Weak, and passionate Men; and as it claims the same Rule and Power in his Kingdom, which He himself alone can have. But,

- This will be Another observation, that it evidently destroys the Rule and Authority of Jesus Christ, as King, to set up any Other Authority in His Kingdom, to which His Subjects are indispensably and absolutely obliged to Submit their Consciences, or their Conduct, in what is properly called Religion. There are some Professed Christians, who contend openly for such an Authority, as indispensably obliges All around Them to Unity of Profession; that is, to Profess even what They do not, what They cannot, believe to be true. This sounds so grossly, that Others, who think They act a glorious part in opposing such an Enormity, are very willing, for their own sakes, to retain such an Authority as shall oblige Men, whatever They themselves think, though not to profess what They do not believe, yet, to forbear the profession and publication of what They do believe, let them believe it of never so great Importance.

Both these Pretensions are founded upon the mistaken Notion of the Peace, as well as Authority, of the Kingdom, that is the Church, of Christ. Which of them is the most insupportable to an honest and a Christian mind, I am not able to say: because They both equally found the Authority of the Church of Christ, upon the ruines of Sincerity and Common Honesty; and mistake Stupidity and Sleep, for Peace; because They would both equally have prevented All Reformation where it hath been, and will for ever prevent it where it is not already; and, in a word, because both equally, devest Jesus Christ of

his Empire in his own Kingdom; set the obedience of his Subjects loose from Himself; and teach them to prostitute their Consciences at the feet of Others, who have no right in such a manner to trample upon them.

The Peace of Christ's Kingdom is a manly and Reasonable Peace; built upon Charity, and Love, and mutual forbearance, and receiving one another, as God receives, us. As for any other Peace; founded upon a Submission of our Honesty, as well as our Understandings; it is falsely so called. It is not the Peace of the Kingdom of Christ; but the Lethargy of it: and a Sleep unto Death, when his Subjects shall throw off their relation to Him; fix their subjection to Others; and even in Cases, where They have a right to see, and where They think They see, his Will otherwise, shall shut their Eyes and go blindfold at the Command of Others; because those Others are not pleas'd with their Enquiries into the Will of their great Lord and Judge.

To conclude, The Church of Christ is the Kingdom of Christ. He is King in his own Kingdom. He is Sole Law-giver to his Subjects, and Sole Judge, in matters relating to Salvation. His Laws and Sanctions are plainly fixed: and relate to the Favour of God; and not at all to the Rewards, or Penalties, of this World. All his Subjects are equally his Subjects; and, as such, equally without Authority to alter, to add to, or to interpret, his Laws so, as to claim the absolute Submission of Others to such Interpretation. And All are His Subjects, and in his Kingdom, who are ruled and governed by Him. Their Faith was once delivered by Him. The Conditions of their Happiness were once laid down by Him. The Nature of God's Worship was one declared by Him. And it is easy to judge, whether of the Two is most becoming a Subject of the Kingdom of Christ, that is, a Member of his Church, to seek all these particulars in those plain and short Declarations of their King and Law-giver himself: or to hunt after Them thro' the infinite contradictions, the numberless perplexities, the endless disputes, of Weak Men, in several Ages, till the Enquirer himself is lost in the Labyrinth, and perhaps sits down in Despair, or Infidelity. If Christ be our King; let us shew our selves Subjects to Him alone, in the great affair of Conscience and Eternal Salvation: and, without fear of Man's judgment, live and act as becomes Those who wait for the appearance of an All-knowing and Impartial Judge; even that King, whose Kingdom is not of this World.

Source: Preached before King George I, 31 March 1717. From the collected works and sermons of Benjamin Hoadly, Bishop of Bangor.

Previously prepared for an earlier version of The Stromata. Accessed July 2026.

Translation: Original English composition, not a translation. Hoadly (1676-1761) is long public domain.

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