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DEMOCRACY AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

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IN these days the spirit of democracy has so saturated our minds with its ideas and ideals that it is not sufficiently descriptive to say that democracy is our creed. It is more than that. It is the frame which contains and limits our creed. Should a man have the temerity to declare himself skeptical of democracy as a panacea, he would at once be eyed suspiciously as a Junker or pityingly as a lunatic. Democracy is inhaled as naturally and quite as unanalytically as the air we breathe. In antithesis to democracy we have set imperialism. We have regarded the two as forming a kind of axiomatic alternative. It is democracy *or* empire. We are a little astonished at the audacity of the few who suggest a change of conjunctives to make the phrase democracy *and* empire.

Yet may we not hold—without being guilty of the most heinous heresy, that of revolt against the spirit of the age—that there is a need of a more cautious consideration of the meaning of democracy and an analysis of the imperial idea especially as applied to our interpretation of the New Testament? One wonders sometimes if we are not intoxicated with democracy so that we face these momentous questions of our day in an exhilarated condition rather than in an attitude of judicial sobriety. Will the next revision of the New Testament scornfully regard as obsolete requirements of literal rendering of the texts and attempt a transmutation of ancient ideas into modern intellectual vernacular rather than a translation of the words of an ancient language into their English equivalents? For to the consternation of many our Lord Jesus not only presents the principles of his ideal social order

as imperial, but actually uses the term "kingdom of God." Our modern substitute is the "democracy of Jesus." The few who are troubled with consistent minds are put to it to explain how it was that Jesus, whom they still recognize as speaking with unique authority upon matters of religion, should think so often in imperial rather than in democratic terms.

Of course it is easy to talk about democracy as the product of modern evolutionary forces and to affirm that Jesus necessarily confined himself to the terms in vogue in his day and especially accommodated himself to Old Testament usage. But Jesus did not hesitate to tear down hallowed customs and traditional interpretations when they obscured the truth. We recall his saying that new wine requires new skins. Long before the time of Jesus the Greeks had tried the most daring experiment in pure democracy the world has ever seen upon a large scale. It is hard to believe that Jesus was unaware of democratic forms of government. As we know, there were strikingly democratic elements in the history of the Hebrew commonwealth. It is conceivable, indeed, that Jesus' message would have been more favorably received by the people at large if he had talked of a democracy and not of a kingdom. At the least we may inquire if there are not such elements of permanence in the kingdom conception as would justify our Lord in retaining the term.

The historical method yields nothing to support the extreme theories of democracy which are accepted without any examinations of their ingredients to discover whether or not they contain the preserving salt of logic. The contract theories which attempt to account for social origins are philosophical explanations spun in the classroom, and not generalizations built upon the sturdy foundation of historical data. Such early codes of law as the Brehon laws reveal the exploitations of the many by the few. Old theories of Saxon democracy have been challenged, and it is now alleged that the only traces of real democracy are to be found in the dependent villages of

serfs. It was the more or less forced democracy of slaves. Probably the earliest form of government was that of the leader who through physical prowess, or possibly through superior mental acuteness, gained his position of chief. Hence we have not degenerated from an earlier state of political equality. Such equality exists historically only on paper. Assumptions from these premises are historically incorrect and psychologically impossible. Our modern practice belies the democratic doctrines upon which many are floating in a sea of intellectual confusion. Society—that is those who have possessed themselves of sovereign power—has decreed the age at which rights of citizenship may be exercised, and has constituted itself judge to decide who may or who may not exercise the suffrage. Aliens must reside in the country for a specified time before they may become citizens. Bolsheviks—that is, the radical minority advocating a different form of government from the existent one—are to be silenced or imprisoned. We are not even consistent in our insistence upon the divine right of the majority. A president of the United States may be elected when his opponent has polled a larger popular vote.

All this means that real democracy does not exist. Democracy has practical limitations. Every government contains a necessary element of tyranny. Otherwise we should have anarchy which would result either in tyranny or annihilation.

Such conclusions lead us to a reconsideration of our theory of democracy. Of course, we are not disputing all the rudimentary teachings found in the primer of democracy. If we believe in God, we hold these. There are certain principles of justice written upon human hearts. The writing may become blurred, but when it is retraced the truth of it is instantly recognized. These are laws we find, not make. They are not to be accounted for by social evolution, though the cycles of social evolution may be required for their complete discovery and recognition. They are necessary corollaries of personal-

ity. Such is the teaching that to every man should be granted the liberty and respect due to every human personality. The very idea of personality includes the idea of a measure of freedom as much as the existence of the triangle necessitates the existence of its angles.

It is undeniable that a man ought to be judged by his merits and not by factitious standards. But even if there should exist the inclination so to judge, perfect wisdom is required also. Liberty of conscience and such liberty of action as shall not infringe upon his fellows' liberties—these are axiomatic enough. But how are these principles to be worked out? Who is to be judge? What methods of determination are to be adopted? Are all men to be considered as possessing equal intelligence in solving these problems? Are all to be given the same degree of liberty? In answering such questions democracy loses its glibness of speech and proceeds with caution, even with halting utterance, to pronounce its decisions.

Indeed, in America, which has furnished the finest sort of an environment for the evolution of democracy, there have been developed politically two different species of democracy. The political atmosphere today is infected with the spirit of what may be called Jacksonian democracy. It is an intellectually undernourished notion that almost any American citizen is qualified to hold any office and without any special training to pass judgment upon all questions of state. Jefferson, the great predecessor of Jackson as protagonist of democracy, was far less radical. Jefferson believed that the mass of the people were not capable of holding office themselves, but could be trained to select those who by ability and training would be most efficient in responsible positions. The first conception of democracy discounts the value of special aptitudes, the second recognizes it; the first holds the benefits of education are exaggerated, the second has faith in educational possibilities; the first despises the expert, the second employs him. Jacksonian democracy of the present day, for example, advocates presenting to the natives

free title to the Philippine Islands and their government. It alleges our assumption of sovereignty there is undemocratic; a usurpation which deprives men of rights and liberties. The democracy of Jefferson replies that no sane man can advocate such a procedure, as it would turn over the Islands to savagery and ignorance. It affirms that the population of the Islands must be trained to self-government before they can be allowed full control over their affairs. Does it not appear, then, that the conception of democracy which will admit of the scrutiny of criticism and withstand the strain of actual experiment is that conception which describes the democratic idea as the recognition of the inherent possibilities of men to be trained to recognize standards of justice, to choose wise and honest leaders, and to cooperate for the common weal?

After we have ruminated for a time over these matters we begin to suspect that the idea of the kingdom of God as developed in the New Testament possesses extraordinary synthetic value. Undoubtedly democracy shines there in full-orbed clarity and brilliance. The gate of the kingdom swings open only to him whose will lifts the latch. Within the kingdom men shall dwell as brethren. Its rewards are not bestowed by favor, but earned by merit. The undemocratic, unbrotherly qualities of pride, selfish ambition, the exploitation of others, do not constitute reason for advancement. Humility and service are the means of advancement by a law as natural as that of the growth of flowers from the showers and sunshine of springtime. In that kingdom the least one is respected. In two important respects the democracy of the kingdom of God lifts the bars of possible democratic achievement by making the ideal the actual. All who enter the kingdom must be as teachable as the little child. All who are in that kingdom are controlled by one spirit—the spirit of Christ. When there is unity of spirit with docility, all things are possible.

But all this is not inconsistent with imperialism. In fact, it requires imperialism as a supplement. Strands of democracy are woven with strands of imperialism. So shall the lines hold us in safety against the tug of the tides. We are learning to give more heed to the pronouncement of the expert. With the growth and the increasing complexity of knowledge every man is compelled to defer to the specialist. He is hailed and crowned. Now Jesus Christ is the great expert on God and humanity. He must reign because he knows. He must govern because he can. His crown is not the work of cunning artificers in precious metals; it is the crown of character, knowledge, ability. The government may be of the people and for the people, but it is not by the people. It is a government by the best.

We are reminded of that clue which we started to follow: Jefferson's idea of democracy. It was thoroughly democratic in spirit but in practice the democracy was modified by concessions to character, wisdom, and ability. The analogy may be followed further. There is a sense in which the New Testament's teaching about the kingdom of God constitutes a realization of the otherwise impossible dream of democracy. We recall that Jefferson expected the people to be trained so that they would be capable of choosing the best. But this still leaves us with the tyranny of the majority—another fatal defect in democratic government. But this insuperable obstacle is swept away by the New Testament principles. No man who is not teachable and possessing the spirit of Christ can attain citizenship in God's kingdom. Real democracy has been impossible because of differences of spirit, judgment and interests. In the kingdom of heaven there is to be likemindedness! Unanimity becomes possible! Democracy comes to its own! Jesus Christ ascends the throne. But he ascends not by the path of the tyrant. He comes by way of unanimous, popular acclaim. He reigns because by his character and his cross, by his knowledge and his wisdom, by his ability and his power, he stands

above all others in unique and superlative majesty. Here is imperialism: Christ is King. Here is democracy: Christ is elder brother. He is sovereign because in Him dwells sovereignty. He is elected because his primacy is acknowledged.

But it is necessary for us to take one more step in the direction of imperialism. The kingdom of God is to be a universal kingdom. This implies the purely imperialistic idea of coercion. Suppose there shall continue to be—as there have always been—those who have refused the proffered citizenship of the kingdom. Unless there is to be eternal civil war, which means the failure of the kingdom, restraint of some sort must be placed upon those who refuse to accept the constitution of the kingdom and who are antagonistic to its spirit. Until such time as these rebels shall not only perceive the folly and wickedness of their course, but shall be converted from their anarchy to loyal citizenship, they must be rendered powerless for revolutionary plottings. We must remember that in God's kingdom of peace, not the ultimate success of war but the very existence of it is a triumph for the enemies of the kingdom. It is unthinkable that the kingdom of God in its final form should continue in constant apprehension of this menace to its being. Whatever allowance may be made for apocalyptic forms of expression, it must be admitted that Jesus definitely committed himself to the promise of the kingdom of truth, righteousness, love, and peace through reconciliation so far as possible; through coercion if necessary.

We have limited ourselves to the use of the future tense for the obvious reason that only through the study of the kingdom in its ideal form can we comprehend its nature and principles. In the partial and preparatory form in which the kingdom now exists upon the earth there can only be an approximation to its teachings. Here we are earth-born and earth-bounded. Here we have process rather than product. However, the principles are unchanged. There must be recognition of the unique author-

ity of Jesus Christ as expert on religion, so to speak. The truth comes to us from Christ only as a light persistently seeking its way into minds darkened by sin and often almost impenetrably hazy because of prejudice and human limitations. Until these persistent rays succeed in completely clarifying our minds we shall understand in part only, and differences of opinion will continue.

Nevertheless, for our encouragement we may remember that truth is unifying, and that the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of Truth, is a unifying agency bringing our minds gradually to knowledge and empowering our wills to such acts of allegiance as truth claims. This means democracy; for no man can claim sole custody of truth. The Spirit is working in many minds, and how shall we judge of truth save by the makeshift method of majority decision? But waiting upon the unifying Spirit of Truth may we not know progress toward unanimity until the day when God and his kingdom shall be revealed in perfection, and freed from ignorance, prejudice, sin, we shall see things as they are? This, also, means imperialism. God's will continues to be thwarted by the rebellious, but those who have accepted citizenship in the kingdom of heaven acknowledge the supremacy of Jesus Christ and by faith anticipate the time when to him "every knee shall bow." We may still believe in the democratic teachings of Jesus, but we must not discard the conception of the kingdom of God.