

Horizons of Hope

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Photo date and location unknown

According to Ernst Benz, a German professor of Church and dogmatic history, the spiritual future of mankind is an issue which must be confronted, regardless of the recent emphasis upon glorification of the present. Benz believes that the current interest in both the physical and spiritual evolution of mankind is indicative of a growing concern for our future—"our present knowledge of man's past development forces the question of man's future to the fore." (p. viii.) His interpretive synopsis of man's changing view of the future manifests Father's constant preparation of His children for His kingdom.

The Divine Principle has deepened our understanding of the direction of history towards one world centered upon our Heavenly Father and the True Parents. Without the Principle, we had only a fragmentary conception of the nature of the second coming and the consummation of human history. But the problem of the ultimate meaning of life had led theologians, scientists, and philosophers to make speculations concerning the meaning and goal of history. These have been reflected in works on eschatology, evolution, and in utopian literature. Benz uses these writings in his study of man's evolving conception of the goal of history; this report summarizes the part of his work dealing with selected thought trends from the first century to the Reformation.

Previous to Jesus' coming, Messianic expectations took divergent paths: one was the desire for a secular empire created by a powerful political figure: the other was the hope for a sacred Kingdom centered upon

a divine being sent by God. According to the Principle, Jesus' mission of establishing both a physical and spiritual kingdom would have fulfilled both expectations, but his premature death prevented him from fulfilling either.

Augustine taught the sanctity of the church

Similarly, early Christian eschatology was split in its emphasis. At first, everyone looked forward to Jesus' return on the clouds to gather up the faithful and start with them a new age as described in John's revelation. As time went on, however, and this prophecy remained unfulfilled, emphasis shifted from the hope for a future parousia (second coming) to a belief that the kingdom was being accomplished through the work of the resurrected Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Christians. This change necessitated a firmer organization of the church.

Benz' interpretation of the role of Saint Augustine in this process throws a new light on his significance. According to Benz, Augustine was instrumental in subduing the Messianic hope and channeling it instead into devotion for the institutional church. Convinced that the kingdom was being created in the present through the agent of the church, he created a theology that built an airtight case for the sanctity of the church. The church, according to Augustine, was the City of God itself. Its servants, the priests, were beyond accusation; its foundation, the authority of the Bible, was beyond question. Since the church in this interpretation, was the historical manifestation of the kingdom, it was seen as taking the place of the future kingdom. Since Augustinian theology was accepted as the basic doctrine of the church, any hope for God's direct intervention in history was almost forgotten.

Joachim's Age of the Holy Spirit

Yet, hope for the kingdom cropped up, from time to time in medieval theology. The abbot Joachim of Fiore had a heightened anticipation of the end of time, but he added a new dimension—that of progress. Joachim's speculations were initiated by a vision in which he claimed to have had revealed to him the inner continuity of the Old and New Testaments, which was affected by the continual work of God, through the Trinity. Joachim went on to divide the course of history into three major periods—each corresponding to one person of the Trinity. The Old Testament age was that of the Father, the New Testament age was that of the Son, and the new age was to be that of the Holy Spirit. These stages closely relate to man's resurrection in history through the formation, growth, and perfection stages initiated respectively by Jacob, Jesus, and the Lord of the Second Advent.

From there, Joachim went on to explore the threefold nature of the growth process: "The first one is one of fear, the second one of faith, the third of love. The first one is lit by the stars, the second one by the light of dawn, the third one by the brightness of the day." Thus Joachim did not see history as ending in a cataclysmic climax, nor did he endorse the Augustinian theory that the church brought the future into the present.

Joachim believed that two trends operated as polarities in man's salvation: the first was continuous and evolutionary change; the other was new and reforming creation. Their interaction was characterized not by conflict but by give-and-take. The result was a history comprised of epochs which successfully built on the foundation of the former while raising man to a higher level. Specifically, Joachim sees man's progression through these ages in terms of his growing love for God. Man, during the period of the Father, was dominated by discipline under the Law and was a servant of God. During the second period, man as a child of God, was in a higher position but still under the Father's direct discipline—Joachim termed this the "Servitude of Sons."

In the third period, that of complete freedom in the expression of love, man becomes a friend of God.

Thus, Joachim's concept of salvation history was progressive. He believed that the next age, that of the Holy Spirit, would offer the greatest measure of love and truth: "The second one (age) brings a deeper understanding because it gives to man the gospel of Jesus Christ. But this gospel still does not represent the highest degree of understanding of salvation. It still shows the divine mysteries wrapped in symbols, images, and sacraments. Only the third age will bring the true spiritual disclosure of the entire divine truth." (p. 41)

In Joachim's opinion, the church of his time belonged only to the second epoch; the new church would be a radically transformed "Church of the Spirit" composed of the new "Men of the Spirit."

Radical reformers pick up the Theme

An important aspect of Joachim's thought is that it called for action in all spheres of life-action to help hasten the coming of the kingdom of the Spirit. If his message had been heeded by key ecclesiastical and political leaders, it would have accomplished his dream of accelerating the dispensation. But, in actuality, it was ignored by the authorities and instead became the tool of revolutionaries.

Many radical uprisings at the time of the Reformation began with a mystical desire to know God face to face, a desire consistent with Joachim's vision of the Kingdom of the Spirit. This progressed into a dissatisfaction with anything considered to be a barrier between man and God. Joachim's theory turned into violence when people ceased to wait for the new age of oneness with God and instead decided to bring it upon themselves by destroying the old age. This, according to Benz, is the prototype for all revolutionary movements.

Thomas Munzer, a German contemporary of Martin Luther, used the issue of oppression of coal miners as a catalyst to initiate his attack on the German princes. His small band of followers were so convinced that their violent uprising was part of God's dispensation that they refused to defend themselves, believing that they could catch the projectiles of enemy artillery with their coat sleeves.

Each one of these ideas outlined by Benz represents more than a portion of intellectual history because they are also part of contemporary thought.

Fundamentalist Christians still follow the literal interpretation of second advent ascribed to the early Christians. Churches concerned with form and structure adhere at least in spirit to the Augustinian heritage. In Joachim we see reflections of the Principle in his ideas of growth, resurrection, and the history of restoration-in his distortions we can see the seeds of the revolutionary movements of modern times. Though somewhat heavy, Benz' study is a valuable guide to the hopes of our ancestors. The prophecies of the Old Testament and the classic writings of the Eastern religions have left us with concrete records of man's desire for oneness with God. But we have no such historical account for the New Testament era, since the New Testament closed with the death of Paul. While we have suspected that philosophers, theologians, and political theorists of modern times have each had a desire for the realization of the kingdom, Benz clearly defines and discusses their vision in an eschatological context. Evolution and Christian Hope reminds us that God's struggle to raise man has been at least partially perceived by man. Perfected man in a perfected society-the kingdom of heaven on earth-has been the dream of all men.