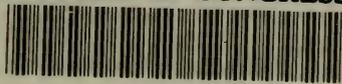


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THE KINGDOM OF GOD

BY
IAN MACLAREN

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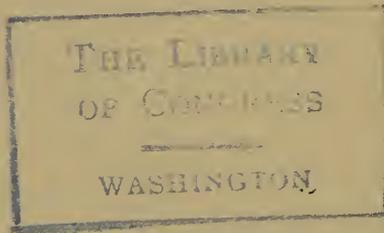
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THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

THERE are times when one wishes he had never read the New Testament Scriptures—that he might some day open St. Luke's Gospel and the most beautiful book in the world might come upon his soul like sunrise. It is a doubtful fortune to be born in Athens and every day to see the Parthenon against the violet sky : better to make a single pilgrimage and carry for ever the vision of beauty in your heart. Devout Christians must be haunted by the fear that Jesus' sublime words may have lost their heavenliness through our familiarity, or that they may have been overlaid by our conventional interpretations. This misgiving is confirmed by the fact that from time to time a fresh discovery is made in Jesus' teaching. As a stranger, unfettered by tradition, will detect in a private gallery some masterpiece generations have overlooked, so an unbiassed mind will rescue from neglecting ages some lost idea of the Master. Two finds have been made within recent years ; the Divine Fatherhood and the Kingdom of God.

If any one will take the Gospels and read them, he will be amazed by the continual recurrence of this refrain, the " Kingdom of God" or " Heaven." Jesus is ever preaching the Kingdom of God and

explaining it in parables and images of exquisite simplicity. He exhorts men to make any sacrifice that they may enter the Kingdom of God (St. Matt. xiii. 44-46). He warns certain that they must not look back lest they should not be fit for the Kingdom of God (St. Luke ix. 62). He declares that it is not possible for others to enter the Kingdom of God (St. Matt. xix. 24). He encourages some one because he is not far from the Kingdom of God (St. Mark xii. 34). He gives to His chief Apostle the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven (St. Matt. xvi. 19). He rates the Pharisees because they shut up the Kingdom of Heaven against men (St. Matt. xxiii. 13). He comforts the poor because theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven (St. Matt. v. 3); and he invites the nations to sit down with Abraham in the Kingdom of Heaven (St. Matt. viii. 11). The Kingdom was in His thought the chiefest good of the soul and the hope of the world.

“ One far-off divine event
To which the whole creation moves.”

Every prophet of the first order has his own message and it crystallizes into a favourite idea. With Moses the ruling idea was law; with Confucius, it was morality; with Buddha, it was Renunciation; with Mohammed, it was God; with Socrates, it was the Soul. With the Master, it was the Kingdom of God. The idea owed its origin to the Theocracy, its inspiration to Isaiah, its form to Daniel, its popularity to John Baptist.

When the forerunner's voice was stifled in the dungeon of Herod, Jesus caught up his word and preached the Utopia of John with a wider vision and sweeter note. The hereditary dream of the Jew passed through the soul of Jesus and was transformed. The local widened into the universal; the material was raised to the spiritual. A Jewish state with Jerusalem for its capital, and a greater David for its king, changed at the touch of Jesus into a moral kingdom whose throne should be in the heart and its borders coterminous with the race. The largeness of Jesus' mind is its glory and its misfortune. The magnificent conception was refused by His countrymen because their God was a national Deity; it has been too often reduced by His disciples because they have no horizon. They have been apt to think that Christianity is an extremely clever scheme by which a limited number of souls will secure Heaven—a rocket apparatus for a shipwrecked crew. Perhaps therefore outside people should be excused for speaking of Christianity as a system of the higher selfishness, because they have some grounds for their misunderstanding. Every one ought to read Jesus' own words and he would find that Jesus did not live and die to afford select Pharisees an immunity from the burden of their fellow men, but to found a Kingdom that would be the salvation of the world.

It has been a calamity that Christians paid hardly any attention to the idea of the Kingdom of Jesus

on which He was always insisting, and gave their whole mind to the entirely different idea of the Church, which Jesus only mentioned once with intention in a passage of immense difficulty. The Kingdom idea flourishes in every corner of the three Gospels, and languishes in the Acts and Epistles, while the Church-idea is practically non-existent in Jesus' sermons, but saturates the letters of St. Paul. This means that the idea which unites has been forgotten, the idea which separates has been magnified. With all respect to the ablest Apostle of Jesus one may be allowed to express his regret that St. Paul had not said less about the Church and more about the Kingdom. But one knows by an instinct why the Church has a stronger fascination for the religious mind than the Kingdom. The Church is a visible and exclusive institution which men can manage and use. The Kingdom is a spiritual and inclusive society whose members are selected by natural fitness and which is beyond human control. One must affirm this or that to be a member of the Church ; one must be something to be a part of the Kingdom of God. Every person who is like Christ in character, or is of His mind, is included in the Kingdom. No natural reading of Church can include Plato : no natural reading of Kingdom can exclude him. The effect of the two institutions upon the world is a contrast. The characteristic product of the Church is ecclesiastics ; the characteristic product of the Kingdom is philanthropists.

Jesus' Kingdom commends itself to the imagination because it is to come, when God's will is done on earth as it is done in heaven—it is the Kingdom of the Beatitudes. It commends itself to the reason because it has come whenever any one is attempting God's will—it is the Kingdom of the Parables. An ideal state, it ever allures and inspires its subjects; a real state, it sustains and commands them. Had Jesus conceived His Kingdom in the future only, He had made His disciples dreamers; had He centred it in the present only, He had made them theorists. As it is, one labours on its building with its splendid model before his eyes; one possesses it in his heart, and yet is ever entering into its fulness. When Jesus sat down with the twelve in the upper room, the Kingdom of God had come; when the Son of Man shall be seen "coming in a cloud with power and great glory" it shall be "nigh at hand" (St. Luke xxi. 27, 31). As Jesus came once and ever cometh, His Kingdom is a present fact and an endless hope.

Jesus commands attention and respect at once when He insisted on a present Kingdom. It was not going to be, it was now and here. That day a man could see, could enter, could possess, could serve the Kingdom of God. Jesus did not despise this world in which we live nor despair of human society to which we belong. He did not discount earth in favour of heaven nor make the life which now is a mere passage to rest. He deliberately founded His Kingdom in this world, and antici-

pated it would run its course amid present circumstances. If you had pointed to rival forces and opposing interests, Jesus accepted the risk. If sin and selfishness had their very seat here, then the more need for the counteraction of the Kingdom. In fact, if there is to be a kingdom of God anywhere, it must be in this world; and if it be impossible here where Jesus died, it will be impossible in Mars or anywhere. When Jesus said the Kingdom of Heaven, be sure He did not mean an unseen refuge whither a handful might one day escape like persecuted and disheartened Puritans fleeing from a hopeless England, but He intended what might be and then was in Galilee, what should be and now is in England. "To those who speak to you of heaven and seek to separate it from earth," wrote Mazzini, "you will say that heaven and earth are one even as the way and the goal are one." And he used also to say, and his words are coming true before our eyes, "The first real faith that shall arise upon the ruins of the old worn-out creeds will transform the whole of our actual social organization, because the whole history of humanity is but the repetition in form and degree of the Christian prayer, "Thy kingdom come: Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Jesus' next point is that the Kingdom consists of regenerate individuals, and therefore He was always trying to create character. This is the salient difference between Jesus and the Jewish

reformers and all reformers. The reformer, who has his own function and is to be heartily commended, approaches humanity from the outside and proceeds by machinery; Jesus approaches humanity from the inside and proceeds by influence. No one can ask a question without at the same time revealing his mind; and so when the Pharisees demanded of Jesus when the Kingdom of God should come (St. Luke xvii. 20), one understands what was their method of social reformation. The new state of things which they called the Kingdom of God—and no better name for Utopia has ever been found—was to come with observation. It was to be a sudden demonstration, and behold the golden age has begun. What they exactly meant was the arrival of a viceroy from God endowed with supernatural power and authority. Till He came, patriotism could do nothing; when He came, patriotism would simply obey, and in a day the hopes of the saints would be realized and the promises of the prophets fulfilled. At one blow the Roman grip would be loosened from the throat of the Jewish nation; the grinding bondage of taxation swept away; the insolent licence of Herod's court ended; the pride of the priestly aristocracy reduced, and the gross abuses of the temple worship redressed. When the Messiah came, they would see the ideal of patriotism in all ages: "A Free State and a Free Church." It was a splendid dream, the idea of a ready-made commonwealth, that has touched in

turn and glorified Savonarola and Sir Thomas More, Scottish Covenanters and English Puritans, and inspired the noblest minds in Greece. It is that the society can be regenerated from without and in the mass ! It is regeneration by machinery—very magnificent machinery no doubt, but still machinery.

Jesus believed that if the Kingdom of God is to come at all, it must be by another method, and it was the perpetual exposition of His method that brought Him into collision with the Pharisees. He knew that the Messiah for the Jews must not be a supernatural Roman emperor or a *Deus ex machinâ*, doing for men what they would not do for themselves. This Messiah was a moral impossibility and this paternal Government would be useless. The true Messiah was a Saviour who would hold up a personal ideal and stimulate men to fulfil it. What was any nation but three measures of meal to be leavened ; you must leaven it particle by particle till it be all changed. Instead of looking hither and thither for the kingdom of God, it would be better to look for it in men's own hearts and lives. The Pharisees prated about being free, meaning they had certain political privileges ; but Jesus told them that the highest liberty was freedom from sin. Did a Pharisee—and the Pharisee with all his faults was the patriot of his day—desire to better his nation ; then let him begin by bettering himself. When the Pharisees learned humility and sympathy, the golden age was not

far distant from Jewry. Jesus' perpetual suggestion to the patriotic class of His day was that they should turn from the politics of the state to the ethics of their own lives.

Jesus afforded a standing illustration of His own advice by His marked abstention from politics. His attitude is not only unexpected, it is amazing and perplexing. He never said one word against the Roman domination; He was on cordial terms with Roman officers; He cast His shield over the hated publican; He tolerated even Herod and Pilate. This was not an accident; it was His line. When clever tacticians laid a trap for Him and pressed Him for a confession of His political creed, He escaped by telling them He had none. Some things were civic, some religious. Let each sphere be kept apart. Render unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar's, and unto God the things which are God's: as for Him, His concern was with divine things. Jesus was so guarded that He refused to arbitrate in a dispute about property—a duty now greedily undertaken by servants. When He stood before Pilate, on the day of the cross, he told that bewildered officer that His kingdom was not of this world, and did not give him the slightest help in arranging a compromise.

On the other hand, none can read Jesus' words without being perfectly certain that they must sooner or later change the trend of politics and the colour of the state. His contemptuous depreciation of the world, His solemn appreciation of the

soul, His sense of the danger of riches, His doctrine of the Fatherhood of God, His sympathy with the poor, His enthusiasm of humanity, was not likely to return unto Him void. No man can read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount or His parables—largely taken from the sphere of labour—or His arguments with the Pharisees, without being leavened with new and unworldly ideas. When these ideas have taken hold of the mind, they will be carried as principles of action into the state. Moral truths ripen slowly; but given time, and Christianity was bound to become the most potent force in the state, although Jesus had never said one word about politics, and His apostles had adhered closely to His example. Men who have been fed with Christ's bread, and in whose heart His spirit is striving, will not long tolerate slavery, tyranny, vice, or ignorance. If they do not apply the principle to the fact to-day, they will to-morrow. Their conscience is helpless in the grip of Christ's word. They will be constrained to labour in the cause of Christ, and when their work is done men will praise them. It is right that they should receive their crown, but the glory does not belong to Hampden and Howard and Wilberforce and Shaftesbury and Lincoln and Gordon; it belongs to Jesus, who stood behind these great souls and inspired them. He never assailed Pilate with bitter invective, or any other person, except religious hypocrites; He never hinted at an insurrection. But it is Jesus, more than any other man or force.

that has made Pilates impossible and taught the human race to live and die for freedom.

Politics are, after all, only a necessary machinery : what comes first is ideas. Just as there is the physical which we see and handle, and the metaphysical which eye has not seen nor ear heard, so there is the political which takes shape in government and legislatures and laws, and there is the meta-political—to use a happy phrase in *Lux Mundi*—which is before all and above all, or politics are worthless. And just as no wise physicist rails at the metaphysical because it cannot be weighed in scales, but freely acknowledges that it is the spirit of the material, so every one knows that all worthy politics are the offspring of noble ideas. When Jesus denied Himself to politics, He did not abdicate His kingdom ; He set up His throne above all the world-kingsdoms and entrenched it among the principles that judge and govern life. When He declined to agitate, He did not abandon the people. He could not, for, unlike many of their pseudo-friends, Jesus loved the people unto death. But He had a wide horizon. He was not content to change their circumstances, He dared to attempt something higher—to change their souls.

Had Jesus depended on a scheme rather than an influence, He had failed. Imagine if He had anticipated the fruits of Christianity, and asked the world to accept the emancipation of the slave and the equality of woman, and civil rights and relig-

ious liberty, Christianity would have been crushed at its birth. It would have spelled anarchy, and in that day would have been anarchy. With the slow, sure education of centuries, these changes have come to be synonymous with righteousness. Christianity may be to-day pregnant with changes for which we are not yet prepared. They will come to birth by-and-by and find people prepared for them. What to our fathers would have seemed a revelation will seem to our children a regeneration. A century ago a slave-owner would have defended himself from God's Word, to-day he would be cast headlong out of the Church. Yesterday a master sweated his servants without sense of wrong-doing, to-day he is ashamed. To-day a millionaire is respected; there are signs that in after years a man leaving a huge fortune will be thought a semi-criminal. So does the Spirit of Jesus spread and ferment. Christ did not ask for power to make laws, He asked for a few men to train—for soil in which to sow His truth. He was content to wait till a generation arose, and said, "Before God this must be done," and then it would be done as Jesus intended. Possess the imagination with an ideal, and one need not vex himself about action.

Jesus laid himself alongside sinful people, and out of them He slowly built up the new kingdom. If a man was a formalist, he must be born again; if the slave of riches, he must sell all he had; if in the toils of a darling sin, he must pluck out his

right eye to enter the kingdom of God. New men to make a new state. The kingdom was humility, purity, generosity, unselfishness. It was the reign of character ; it was the struggle for perfection. Chunder Sen, the Indian prophet, described Jesus' Kingdom perfectly : " A spiritual congregation of souls born anew to God." Say not, " Lo here, lo here," as if one could see a system or a government. " The kingdom of God is within you."

Investigate a little farther, and you notice Jesus fused His disciples into one body, and by this act alone separated Himself from the method of philosophy. Philosophy is content with an audience ; Jesus demands a society. Philosophy teaches men to think ; Jesus moves them to do. Philosophy can do no more because it has no centre of unity : the kingdom of God is richer, for there is Jesus. Socrates obliterated himself ; Jesus asserted Himself, and united His followers to each other by binding them to Himself. Loyalty to Jesus was to be the spinal cord to the new body, and two sacraments were to be the signs of the new spirit. Each was perfect in its simplicity—a beautiful poem. One was Baptism, where the candidate for God's kingdom disappeared into water and appeared again with another name. This meant that he had died to self and had risen a new creature, the child of the Divine Will. The other was the Lord's Supper, where Jesus' disciples eat bread and drink wine in remembrance of His death. This meant that they had entered into the spirit of

their Master and given themselves to the service of the world. Those are the only rites of Jesus, those His bonds, and with this lowly equipment—two pledges of sacrifice—began the kingdom of God. Within all nations, and under the shadow of all governments, dividing none, resisting none, winning all and uniting all, was to rise the new state of peace and goodwill toward men.

How was the kingdom to impress itself upon the world and change the colour of human life? As Jesus did Himself, and after no other fashion. Of all conquerors He has had the highest ambition, and above them all He has seen His desire. He has dared to demand men's hearts as well as their lives and has won them—how? By coercion? by stratagem? by cleverness? by splendour? By none of those means that have been used by rulers. By a scheme of his own invention—by the Cross. The Cross meant the last devotion to humanity; it was the pledge of the most uncomplaining and effectual ministry. When you inquire the resources of the Kingdom of Heaven, behold the Cross. They are faith and love. Its soldiers are the humble, the meek, the gentle, the peaceful. "Forgive your enemies," said Jesus; "help the miserable, restore the fallen, set the captive free. Love as I have loved, and you will succeed." Amazing simplicity! amazing originality! Hitherto kingdoms had stood on the principle of selfishness—grasp and keep. This kingdom was to rest on sacrifice—suffer and serve. Amazing hope, that

anything so weak, so helpless, could regenerate the masterful world ! But Jesus has not been put to shame : His plan has not failed. There are many empires on the face of the earth to-day, but none so dominant as the kingdom of God. Jesus by the one felicitous stroke of the Cross has replaced the rule of rights by the idea of sacrifice ; and when Jesus' mind has obtained everywhere, and men cease to ask, " What am I to get ? " and begin to say, " What can I give ? " then we shall see a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwell eth righteousness.

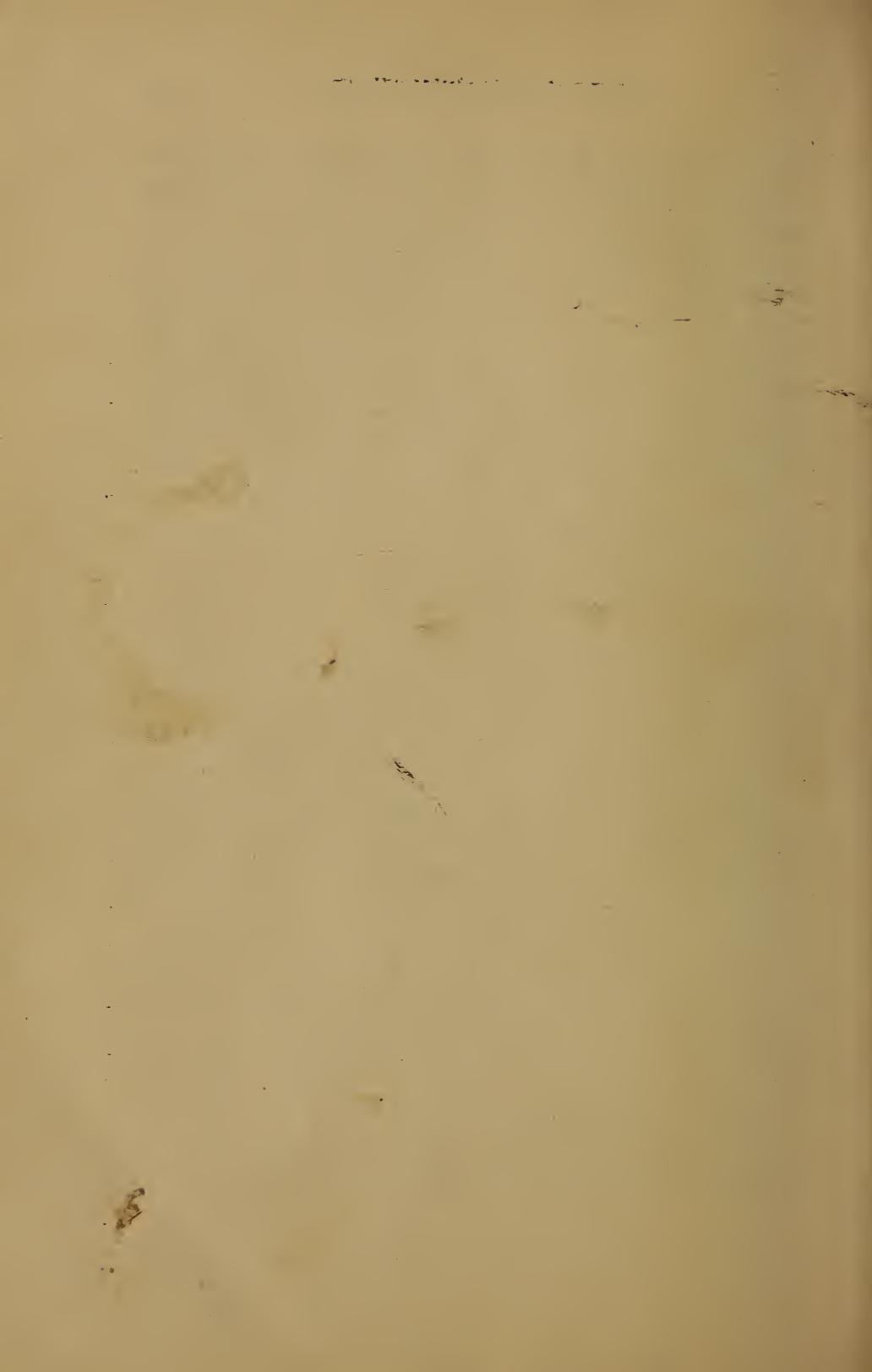
It was natural that the imagination of Jesus should inspire heroic souls in every age ; it was perhaps inevitable that few could enter into His mind. Nothing has given such a moral impetus to human society ; nothing has conferred such nobility of character as the kingdom of God ; nothing has been so sadly misunderstood. The sublime self-restraint of Jesus, His inexhaustible patience, His immovable charity, His unerring insight, have not descended to His disciples. They longed to anticipate the victory of righteousness, and burned to cleanse the world by force. They have gained for themselves an imperishable name, but they have failed. When the Roman Empire was laid waste, and the world seemed to be falling to pieces, St. Augustine described the new empire that should rise on the ashes of the old. The *City of God* stands first among his writings, and created the Holy Roman Empire, but the Papacy has not redeemed

humanity. When the life of Florence was eaten out by the Medicis, Savonarola purified the city for a space with a thunderstorm. The Florentines cast out their Herods at the bidding of their Baptist, they burned their vanities in the market-place, they elected Jesus King of Florence by acclamation. In a little they brought Herod back, and burned the Baptist in the same market-place. The Puritans were quiet, serious, peaceable men who were outraged by the reign of unrighteousness, and drew the sword to deliver England. They made the will of God triumphant for a little. Then came the reaction, and iniquity covered the land as with a flood. It was high failure, but it was failure. It does not become us to criticise those forlorn hopes; we ought to learn from their reverse. The kingdom of God can only rule over willing hearts; it has no helots within its borders. It advances by individual conversion, it stands in individual consecration. Laws can do but little for this cause; the sword less than nothing. The kingdom will come in a land when it has come in the hearts of the people—neither sooner nor later.

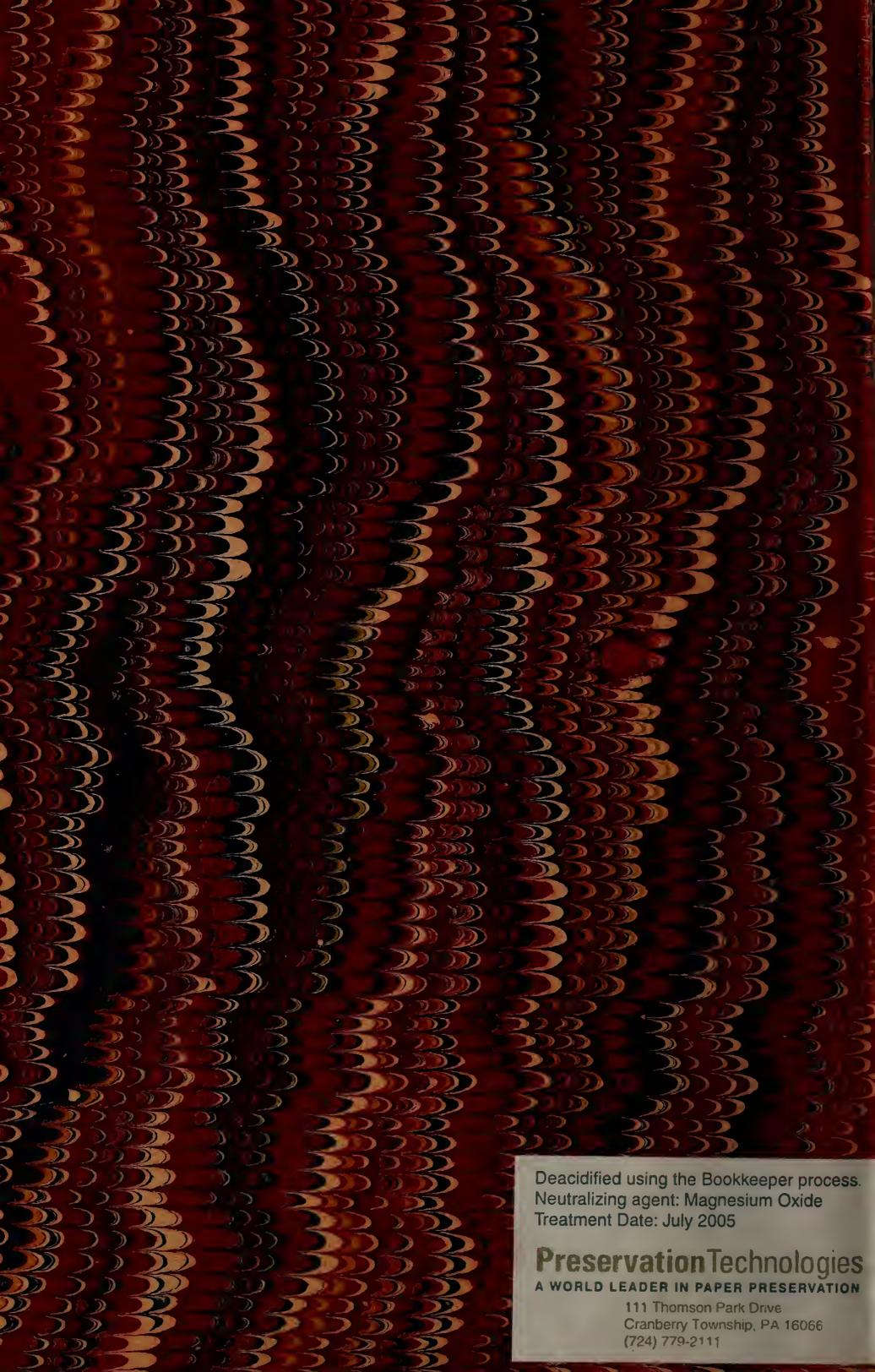
The kingdom of God cometh to a man when he sets up Jesus' Cross in his heart, and begins to live what Mr. Laurence Oliphant used to call "the life." It passes on its way when that man rises from table and girds himself and serves the person next him. Yesterday the kingdom was one man, now it is a group. From the one who washes to the one whose feet are washed the kingdom grows

and multiplies. It stands around us on every side, —not in Pharisees nor in fanatics, not in noise nor tumult, but in modest and Christ-like men. One can see it in their face, and catch it in the tone of their voice. And if one has eyes to see and ears to hear, then let him be of good cheer, for the kingdom of God is come. It is the world-wide state, whose law is the Divine will, whose members obey the spirit of Jesus, whose strength is goodness, whose heritage is God.

JOHN WATSON.



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