

Pilgrims

By

Curtis Dickinson

A Pilgrim is one who makes a journey for a religious motive, one who undertakes a journey with a mission. Abraham, Noah and Abel are said to have “confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.” Peter pleads with Christians “as sojourners and pilgrims, to abstain from fleshly lusts” (I Peter 2:11). But where are the Christian pilgrims? Where are those saints who take seriously their mission on earth?

Another Kingdom. He who recognizes himself as a pilgrim also understands that he comes from another kingdom and that, while he lives under the power of a kingdom of this world, he is, in fact, a citizen of a kingdom that “is not of this world.” Its headquarters are in Heaven, where Christ sits in the seat of authority, and we have our citizenship there. “For our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20). God has “translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love” at the time of our redemption from sin (Col. 1:3, 14).

This is what makes us pilgrims. We are in this world as sojourners and strangers, not to give it our allegiance nor to be shaped into its mold, because we have another King who commands us to whom we owe our lives. We will render taxes to Caesar—we are not free-loaders nor bums—but we will not be subject to his whims. Ours is a different kingdom.

And here is the rub! Nothing more readily kindles the hate and anger of men than for a solitary soul to resist the collective will of the throng—especially when that will is centered in loyalty to the earthly kingdom for “the good of all.” Christ was executed on the basis that He resisted the Kingdom of Caesar, the Jews creaming out “We have no king but Caesar!”

The one who demonstrates a faith in another King and shows that he is a citizen of another kingdom should not expect to win any popularity contests in the world. The builders of modern Babel, who design all the modern paraphernalia to complicate life, to control our activities and give us security in a stainless steel, antiseptic, and computerized electronic world of idiots, do not believe it is possible for one to find more joy in his solitary way than can be found in theirs. For this reason Jesus said that His disciples would be hated by the world, just as He was. Pilgrims may be admired from afar, but they don’t get elected to office or win the “best citizen” award.

The Christian pilgrim does not try to be identified as a “success” in the world, as great in the world, as superior to others. He expects none of this, therefore he is not disappointed when he does not get recognition from the world.

We should not be surprised when those who claim to be in Christ’s kingdom suggest that we ought to try to make the best of both kingdoms. If we are to make any impression on the kingdom of the world we must meet them on their own terms, they say. We must become famous athletes, politicians, actors, TV stars, etc. We must first be approved of the world before we can show that we are NOT of this world!

Perhaps you can imagine Paul talking to Timothy and Silas. “What we must do to make the church grow is get some Christian gladiators in the arena at Rome; and above all, we must train some actors for the theaters in Athens and Corinth.” I doubt if the thought ever occurred to Paul, and I doubt if he would approve the current fad to try to enhance the power of the gospel by featuring so-called Christian entertainers. It is just hard for me to think of Norma Zimmer or Pat Boone as pilgrims in any sense, much less in the Biblical sense.

There is another way of escaping the pilgrim way—and all the pitfalls and tribulations that are found in that way—and that is the popular doctrine that Jesus is not King YET, but someday he will return to be King. This is a false gospel that says that when Jesus came the first time He couldn’t be King because the Jews wouldn’t let him, that He was mistaken when He said that the Kingdom was at hand, and that He is not now King, but only our Savior and the Lord of such as will “allow” Him to be! What kind of King is this, who is weaker than the Jews, and who can be Lord, only if you let him!

If He is not now King, then there is not now any Kingdom, and we are not now pilgrims with citizenship in another kingdom. It is no wonder that confusion reigns among so many who are not sure whether to put all their effort into doing the will of the King, or to put their effort into doing the will of the King, or to put their effort into preserving the environment, or the economy, or the constitution! Christians spread their energies and resources among so many of the world’s causes that they wear themselves out and become ineffective in proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

The mission of the Christian pilgrim is not to join the causes of the world, but to press the cause of the King, to hold forth the word of life that men may be brought under the power of Christ and into His Kingdom.

Obedience. As a pilgrim in search of a better country, Abraham was not a drifter, taking the path of least resistance. He was guided by God’s commands. “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed...” (Heb. 11:8). Here faith and obedience are welded together in the pilgrimage. You don’t have one without the other.

Obedience is the working of faith, and it is the backbone of the Christian pilgrim. Here is where Christ glorified the Father, in his perfect obedience—“obedience even unto death”—and here is where we are called on to fulfill our pilgrimage. Unfortunately this is where many of us fail most often. It is easy to rationalize away the commands, to find excuse after excuse and with very logical and practical applications, evade total obedience.

Instead of obedience, the modern pilgrim substitutes “faith,” or what he calls faith. He is told that the important thing is to “know Jesus,” not to know “doctrine,” which simply means teaching—the teaching of Jesus. He gladly accepts the popular teaching (which itself is a doctrine) that it is much better to have a “personal knowledge” of Jesus than to be concerned about obedience to Him. How anyone can have a “personal knowledge” of Jesus apart from his commandments and the obedience to them no one has yet explained.

In fact, you cannot know Jesus until you follow Him. The apostles had an acquaintance with Jesus before they became apostles. But they never knew Him until they left everything and began to follow Him. Many in the church are acquainted with

Jesus. But if you have not taken up His commands to obey Him and to follow Him to maturity, to apply His words, and be conformed to His image—if you do not make this your primary goal, then you do not know him.

A pilgrim respects the laws of the land of his sojourn, but he is guided by the purpose of his mission, not by the fashion of the natives. “When in Rome do as the Romans” is pagan, not Christian. Paul said that he was all things to all men that he might win some, but his manner of life was so different from the unbelieving world that he was considered a fool. It is not credit to a Christian that he can participate in the debauched society of those who defy the laws of heaven and never be suspected of being a stranger to it all! One cannot obey the King and still be comfortable in the camp of the rebels. “His servants you are whom you obey” writes Paul. Our commands are settled in the homeland. “We must obey God and not man.”

Journey’s End. Every pilgrimage has an end. Abraham found no permanent home in Canaan, but looked for a country yet to come. All the kingdoms of the world are short lived. Many are predicting the end of our own beloved republic within a few years. Already it has undergone, and is undergoing, radical changes which threaten its existence.

But even without any of these disintegrating changes, we know that our nation and our world are not designed to last. “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief; in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.”

“Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in all holy living and godliness, looking for and earnestly desiring the coming of the day of God, when the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved and the elements shall melt with fervent heat. But according to His promise, we look for new heavens and a new earth wherein dwells righteousness. Wherefore, beloved, see that you look for such things, be diligent that you be found of Him in peace, without spot, and blameless” (II Peter 3:10–14).

There seems to be almost unanimous agreement between evangelists, sociologists and many scientists that our planet is like a sinking ship. Droughts and famine are old plagues, but now threatening millions more than have ever suffered before. The pollution of morals has almost reached the saturation pint. As in the days of Noah, there is violence everywhere and man’s imaginations are continually evil. It is under such conditions that the Lord promised to return in judgment, to rescue His own and destroy those who obey not the gospel.

In spite of all this, not many heed the warnings of God. Peter wrote that “in the last days mockers shall come with mockery, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of his coming? For, from the day that the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.” This is the doctrine of evolution, that there has been an unbroken development of life from the time it first appeared, a uniform evolution which is till going on, and will continue for ages to come, unless interrupted by some “natural” phenomenon. These humanists work desperately to prop up our broken-down society with more controls, regulations and reforms. To make such props work they need the cooperation of everyone; therefore, they strongly resent the pilgrim, who has no interest in their flimsy structure but rather seeks to recruit them

for his own country! No wonder Jesus said the world would despise His followers. “But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed of them, to be called their God; for he has prepared for them a city” (Heb. 11:16). The world will despise the pilgrim who turns his back on the things the world loves. But he will be welcomed by his King with glory and honor!

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