

*The Kingdom of God in History*, B.T. Viviano, O.P., Michael Glazier, 1988. 168 pp.

The Church of God (Abrahamic Faith) can only welcome this masterly treatment of the doctrine of the Kingdom of God in church history. Viviano provides a telling witness against all systems of professed Christianity which do not have Jesus' central message as their basis. He himself was prompted to deal with this subject when he discovered to his amazement that the theme of the Kingdom of God "played hardly any role in the systematic theology I had been taught in the seminary" and "had been largely ignored in the theology and spirituality and liturgy of the church in the past two hundred years, and when not ignored, often distorted beyond recognition" (p. 9).

For those of us whom Scripture has taught to view Christianity as the development of the core idea of the Kingdom of God, these are appealing admissions, and it is hoped that they will cause many to share Viviano's amazement. The only fitting response to Viviano's documentation of the Kingdom idea in history would be a heightened appreciation of John Weiss' and Albert Schweitzer's revolutionary discovery that Jesus proclaimed a future apocalyptic Kingdom as the center of His gospel.

Viviano is rightly suspicious of systems which try to make Luke 17:21 (“The kingdom of God is within” or “amongst you”) the definitive text for Jesus’ doctrine of the Kingdom. It is a mistake to make this verse the starting point for our understanding of the Kingdom. More programmatic verses such as Mark 1:15 must be the basis. Viviano gives a helpful account of the traditional misunderstandings of the Kingdom, as meaning “heaven” at death, a synonym for the church, or a political program. It is refreshing to see him admit that some of the church fathers maintained the eschatological view of the Kingdom “which is a continuation of the New Testament doctrine itself” (p. 30), though historic Christianity can hardly be said to be a faithful reflection of that understanding of the Kingdom.

As a chronicle of the history of the greatest idea ever put to mankind, this short summary is a dramatic revelation of the way in which mainstream Christianity has evaded the apocalyptic gospel of Jesus. The spiritualizing, mystical understanding of the Kingdom inherited from Origen through Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther is exposed as incompatible with Jesus’ proclamation. Here, surely, is a powerful call for a return to a gospel which is historically and theologically true to the Bible.

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