

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

Vol. XII, No. 6

©Gary North, 1988

Nov./Dec. 1988

REPRESENTING THE ABSENTEE LANDLORD

by Gary North

Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country. And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it (Matt. 21:33-34).

God is pictured in the Bible as being absent from His people. Yet He is also pictured as being inescapably present. He is with men even in hell (Ps. 139:8), yet the essence of hell is separation from God's place of residence in heaven (Luke 16:23). This points to the proper definition of God's being: both transcendent and immanent. We must affirm both if we affirm Christian orthodoxy.

How can He be absent? He is absent from His people **physically**. God created Adam, spoke to him, brought the animals to him for Adam to name, but then departed. Adam and Eve were physically alone when the serpent came to tempt them. God returned to bring judgment against Adam, Eve, and the serpent. Then He removed them from the garden, thereby also removing them from His physical presence.

Man is under God, for man is a creature. He is under God judicially, for he is a judge over the creation, who will eventually judge even the angels (1 Cor. 6:3). Man is under God economically, for he is a steward of God's assets. This position of subordination is manifested publicly by means of such things as person's oaths, verbal proclamations, institutional memberships, and self-conscious lifestyles. Each person must serve one of two masters, God or Mammon.

Presence by Representation

The landlord financed the creation of the vineyard. He then hired men who agreed to become stewards of his property. These stewards were to guard and dress the vineyard until such time as the vines began to bear fruit. But the stewards had not seen the landlord throughout the period of growth. Their attitude changed. Hired as subordinate leaseholders, they began to see themselves as the owners of the field. They had not planted it, but somehow they were more than caretakers or sharecroppers. Thus, they regarded any intrusion on their mental universe as an invasion by a hostile force.

When the servants of the landlord arrived, the tenant farmers beat some and killed others. Word got back to the landlord, but instead of bringing judgment against them, he graciously gave them one more opportunity to hand over his rightful crop. He sent his son. This was his heir.

This was the man who possessed the judicial title of sovereignty. It was the landowner's highest representative.

The leaseholders were not impressed. They mistook the leaseholder's patience for weakness. So they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance" (v. 38b). They imagined that by killing the heir, lawful title would somehow be transferred to them, even though the landlord was still alive.

The coming of the servants was supposed to remind them of the continuing sovereignty of the owner. So was the coming of the son. **Ownership is not affected by distance.** Ownership is judicial, not geographical. The fact that these tenant farmers were close to the vineyard while the owner was distant in no way altered the subordinate position of the leaseholders. It was the landlord's servants who were the sovereign spokesmen for the owner, not the leaseholders.

The Intent of the Parable

The parable was designed to challenge the Jewish leaders of the day, but by implication also the Romans. "To the Jew first, but also to the Greek" refers to covenant relationships, including sanctions. Mankind in general had treated the creation as if there were no God, or as if that God would not impose sanctions. But Israel had compounded the sin, for Israel had dealt with God through Moses and the prophets. The servants of God had come to Israel directly.

The prophets were God's representatives to Israel, though occasionally to the gentile world (e.g., Jonah). Then came the Son of God. Jesus Christ was not merely God's representative to Israel but to the whole of mankind. Through Him, God the Father reasserted publicly His judicial claims to the whole earth. This reassertion by God was legally and physically **representative**. Jesus' ministry was to the Jews first, but also to the Greeks. The chronology of His ministry did not negate its universality.

The Jews had been the representatives of God to the gentile world. Zion was the world's religious center, whether or not kings came to worship there. The Temple and sacrifices were in Jerusalem. Immediately after He presented this parable, He announced the forthcoming transfer of the kingdom of God from Israel to the church international (Matt. 21:43). By means of this transfer, Jesus made the church God's lawful representative. It became His prophetic voice. The church has experienced persecution from gentiles for the same reason that the prophets experienced persecution from the Israelites: its position as God's lawful representative.

How did Jesus gain the authority to make this transfer? Through His inheritance of the kingdom after His death and resurrection (Matt. 28:18). He met the standards of the Father. He produced the required fruit. He thereby identified Himself as the true husbandman, the true vine, and the true heir. Thus, when He made the transfer of the kingdom to the church, He did so as its authorized owner. Because of His successful ministry in history, Jesus became the new owner **in history**. Thus, the church becomes heir with Him **in principle and in history**. The corrupt leaseholders of the world, claim-jumpers all, can maintain permanent control over the landlord's vineyard only by repenting and joining the church.

Departure Again

Why did Jesus depart? Because He had inherited the kingdom from His Father. As the new landlord, He again became an absentee landlord. But this time, He sent His spokesman, the Holy Spirit. **This marked a major change in God's administration in history.** Jesus said that He had to leave so that the Comforter would come:

Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you (John 16:7).

The situation is different in New Testament times. The Landlord has sent His Spirit to guide His servants. He has also provided His servants with His Authorized Book of Effective Stewardship, the Bible. When Christians bring the gospel of Christ to the claim-jumpers of this world, Satan's unauthorized squatters, we come with a message from the Landlord: "Serve me in history, as was originally agreed to by your father, Adam. If you do, you gain lawful title to the land through my Son. You become fellow-heirs with Christ."

The Inheritance

What the New Testament offers is the actual transfer of title to the tenant farmers. This is the extraordinary grace of the Landlord: **He offers title to murderers and thieves if they swear allegiance in history to the true heir, Jesus Christ.** The Israelite tenants believed that they could inherit by murdering the son of the landlord. In fact, it was through the death of the true heir that inheritance has become possible to all men, to the Jew first but also to the Greek. And because of Israel's pig-headedness, the chronological order has reversed: to the Greek first, but also to the Jew (Rom. 11). The second-born son inherits because of the ethical rebellion of the first-born son. This is a continuing theme in the Bible, from Adam to Jesus.

The basis of this inheritance is **adoption**. Those whom God regenerates He makes sons of His own household (John 1:12). These sons then become heirs of the kingdom. They become like the faithful and productive servants in another parable, the ones who inherit cities (Luke 19:17-19).

Visible Sons, Visible Kingdom

The servants of the parable were representatives of the landlord in history. The tenant farmers were in rebellion to the landlord in history. The tenants persecuted and slew

the representatives in history. The son of the landlord was sent in history and was slain in history. He then became the cornerstone in history.

What about judgment by the landlord? Was his judgment against the tenants outside of history?

When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? They [the Jews listening to Jesus] say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons (Matthew 21; 40-41).

Their own words condemned them. Jesus then drove home His point in no uncertain terms: the judgment was coming soon against Israel, and the kingdom would soon be transferred to a new set of heirs:

Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof (Matthew 21; 42-43).

The kingdom of God is universal. This means that it is inescapably historical. There are representatives of God's kingdom in New Testament history as surely as there were in ancient Israel. They have been sent the Comforter, who manifests the presence of that physically absent Lord of the universe.

How strange, then, that Christians today regard the presence of the Holy Spirit as less significant culturally than the presence of God's past representatives, the prophets. They regard the existence of the completed Bible as less significant culturally than, for example, the ministry of Jonah. They regard the visible signs of the universal kingdom of God in history as less significant culturally than the presence of tiny Israel in the ancient Near East. Israel was a nation; Israel had God-revealed laws governing her; Israel had priests and Levites. Israel was a theocracy, and its institutions testified to the authority of God. Not so the kingdom in the modern world, we are told; it has no comparable manifestations. It is an invisible kingdom, a kingdom of the heart, a kingdom only for servants who will, as before, be persecuted and slain until the Landlord comes at last in judgment.

Conclusion

Today's Christian world denies implicitly and explicitly the doctrine of representation in history. The presence of the Holy Spirit and the Bible supposedly have changed nothing historically. The same defeat, the same cultural impotence afflicts the church as afflicted the prophets of Israel.

Then what cultural difference has the cross made? And what difference will it make? In pessimillennialism, the Landlord cannot exercise authority in His kingdom without appearing in person. Then why did Jesus bother to depart, and of what importance are the Holy Spirit and a completed Bible? And what kinds of representatives are we Christians, who supposedly have less going for us culturally than the prophets of Old Covenant Israel?

Christian Reconstruction is published six times a year, alternating with **Biblical Economics Today**. It is published by the Institute for Christian Economics, a non-profit, tax-exempt educational organization. A free six-month subscription is sent to those who ask to be put on the mailing list. **Subscriptions:** P.O. Box 8000, Tyler, TX 75711. Donations are fully tax deductible. Checks should be made out to **Institute for Christian Economics**.