



DISCOVERING THE HIDDEN CHRIST

# Everyone Belongs to God

**Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt**

Foreword by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

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Discovering the Hidden Christ

**Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt**

*Compiled and edited by Charles E. Moore*



PLOUGH PUBLISHING HOUSE

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Here, there is no Gentile or Jew,  
circumcised or uncircumcised,  
barbarian, Scythian, slave or free,  
but Christ is all, and is in all.

*Colossians 3:11*

## Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>xv</i>
<b>1. Keep the Kingdom in View</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Avoid Being Religious</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>3. See How Christ Is Already at Work</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>4. Remain among the People</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>5. Open Wide Your Heart</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>6. Make God's Love Known</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>7. Show the Gospel</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>8. Allow the Spirit to Work</b>	<b>116</b>
<b>9. Always Hope</b>	<b>122</b>
<i>Reflection and Discussion Questions</i>	<i>132</i>
<i>Sources</i>	<i>139</i>

## Foreword

### Your Gospel Is Too Small

**In every age,** God's people need prophets to help us see beyond our blind spots – to expand our vision of what God is about.

Jeremiah was a prophet. To a people in exile, caught between the false hope that their God would destroy Babylon and the despair of thinking God had forgotten them, Jeremiah proclaimed a new vision. The old images of God's faithfulness would no longer suffice. Yes, their God had saved humanity in an ark and washed away the wicked in a great flood. Yes, their God had brought them out of Egypt, drowning Pharoah's army in the Red Sea.

But a salvation that requires someone else's destruction is too small a salvation, Jeremiah proclaimed. To a people in exile, he wrote, "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have

## Everyone Belongs to God

carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jer.29:7).

You will not be saved apart from your neighbors, the prophet says. Everyone belongs to God. Or, to quote another of the biblical prophets:

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to restore the survivors of Israel;  
I will give you as a light to the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

*Isaiah 49:6, NRSV*

Jesus came preaching peace to all people. But he got into the most trouble for showing the religious insiders how the people they counted out often understood the advent of God’s reign better than they did. Take Luke 4. For his first sermon in his own hometown, Jesus took a text from Isaiah, the prophet. And when he said that the great day of Jubilee had arrived for God’s people, everyone rejoiced.

But when he pointed out that a Syrian soldier and a Gentile woman had more faith than anyone else in their day, the hometown crowd tried to throw him off a cliff.

## *Foreword*

Your gospel is too small, Jesus said. But no one wants the prophet to speak so directly to them.

Better to celebrate that the scripture is fulfilled in our hearing than to grapple with the ways God's Word forces us to expand our imagination.

But expand we must. At least, that's what the prophets tell us.

The text of the book you now hold in your hands is over a century old, but it contains the words of a prophet who was ahead of his time. At the beginning of the so-called "Christian Century," when science and progress seemed to be bringing Christendom to its full height of glory, Christoph Blumhardt heard a word that cut through his cultural formation and easy assumptions: Everyone belongs to God.

Cultural captivity is, of course, a far cry from exile, but the long march of Christendom, as we now see more clearly, took God's people as far from the Promised Land as Nebuchadnezzar's forces ever did. As in the Babylonian captivity, we face a dual temptation.

On the one hand, there are those who say, "All you've got to do is believe." God is greater than the forces of secularism and materialism, atheism and individualism. Yes, Western Christianity is

compromised. But the pure in heart – those who *really* believe – can be saved right here, *right now*. All you have to do is bow your head and say this simple prayer....

On the other hand, the cynics point out, the Good Book became the Bad Book in so much of the Western missionary enterprise. We over-evangelized the world too lightly, exporting cultural hegemony along with the faith, doing more harm than good. Christendom has failed, they say, and so it is best to leave the name of Christ behind. Do good, for goodness' sake. At the very least, try to do no harm.

In the midst of this crisis, I hear Blumhardt's words for twenty-first-century Christians in the same vein as Jeremiah's to seventh-century-BC Israel: "The Risen One wants to draw people to himself, and so propaganda for a particular confession of faith or church is no concern of his. You must stand up and represent the gospel of the kingdom that shines for all people, no matter who they are."

We cannot give up on the missionary enterprise because we have misunderstood and abused it. Instead, Blumhardt insists, we must reclaim the heart of Christian mission.

## *Foreword*

Our gospel has been too small. It is, indeed, too small a thing to think that the hope of the world rests in our ability to recruit others into a religion which has too often made us morally worse.

To confess that the hope of the world is Jesus Christ is to open ourselves to a kingdom beyond our control – beyond our imagination, even. It is to embrace the revolutionary notion that everyone belongs to God.

Though Bonhoeffer had not yet introduced the term when Blumhardt wrote these letters, it was in the midst of his own confrontation with the crisis of Western Christianity that he wrote of “religionless Christianity.” Bonhoeffer had so little time to explore what this term meant, even less how one might practice it in the world.

But this volume fills some of that void. For it, we can all be grateful. Take and read the words of a prophet for our time.

*Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove*

## Introduction

**Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt** (1842–1919), a Lutheran pastor in Germany, was not at home either in church or secular circles; his views seemed to challenge and disconcert everyone. And yet he possessed a strange, infectious confidence in God's history and an uncanny ability to see what it takes to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world.

Son of the renowned Johann Christoph Blumhardt, a pastor in Möttlingen and later in Bad Boll, Christoph Blumhardt continued his father's work. But he found himself increasingly alienated from the established German church and eventually broke with all the outward forms of church life, clerical robe and all. His exit from the institutional church was partly due to his growing concern over the dire social conditions

around him, which eventually led him to take to the streets in support of the labor movement.

Though he served in the Wurttemberg parliament as a Social Democrat from 1900 to 1906, he could never really bring himself to be a tried-and-true party member. He returned to Bad Boll and in his later years sought to point those who would listen to him to a vision of God's kingdom that would bring about lively communities of faith where people could give themselves completely to God's future.

Richard Wilhelm was one of many who were greatly influenced by Blumhardt's fiery conviction that the advancement of God's kingdom – its here-and-now actualization – must take precedence over all else. When Wilhelm set out to become a missionary in China, he was already closely involved with Blumhardt. During his short service as an assistant pastor in Bad Boll, Wilhelm had been deeply moved and gripped by this spirit-filled man of faith. He went on to marry Blumhardt's daughter Salome. So it was of special significance to Blumhardt that Wilhelm and his wife went oversees to serve the cause of Christ. To him they were, above all, envoys of God's kingdom – a cause far greater than what was expected of missionaries.

## *Introduction*

In May 1899 the General Evangelical-Protestant Missionary Society (Far East) assigned Wilhelm the territory of Kiaochow, on China's Yellow Sea. Under European duress, China had been forced to cede this area to Germany on a ninety-nine-year lease. As a missionary pastor in Tsingtao (fast becoming a flourishing colonial city), Wilhelm was assigned a threefold task: to be a pastor, spread Christianity among the Chinese, and promote understanding between China and Germany.

Under Blumhardt's influence, however, Wilhelm viewed the Missionary Society, of which he was formally a part, as merely an outward instrument serving the higher purpose of God's kingdom. He was neither interested in traditional mission nor in representing Germany. He wanted something entirely new.

Blumhardt, for his part, felt a special responsibility for the work of his son-in-law, whom he had so obviously influenced. This motivated Blumhardt to write over a hundred letters to Wilhelm between 1898 and 1914.<sup>1</sup> Many of the selections that follow are extracts, thematically arranged, from these letters. The rest are from various sermons and lectures. (To help the

<sup>1</sup> These letters are contained in their entirety in the forthcoming book, *Christ in the World: Letters to Richard Wilhelm in China* (1898–1914).

text flow, thoughts from various letters and talks have in places been synthesized, and transitional phrases added. Bible references have also been added for those wishing to explore the biblical foundation of Blumhardt's thought.)

Full of hearty warmth, Blumhardt's words radiate a fatherly care, even as they voice a prophetic battle cry for authentic Christian witness. The thread that runs through these selections is Blumhardt's unwavering belief in the living Christ as Lord over all. As Blumhardt saw it, Jesus claims the whole world for his own, not just the Christian world. No one is separated from Christ's love – neither the “unchurched” nor the “pagan,” and especially not the oppressed. On the contrary, the will and purpose of the common person who thirsts for meaning and strives for justice, and the insights and longings of non-Christian peoples, originate in the will of God himself.

What then was Wilhelm's task as a missionary, and the Christian's broader task in the world as Christ's witness? It was to carry into the world, particularly the non-Christian world, “the gospel of Jesus Christ, not the gospel of the Christians.”

## *Introduction*

In the following pages the reader will discover more precisely the difference between these two gospels. Suffice it to say that the “gospel of the Christians” has little or nothing to do with the revolutionary message of Christ itself. Jesus did not come to found churches, defined by doctrine or ritual, but to set in motion a movement of the Spirit that would encompass nations and lead to inner freedom, peace, and social justice. For Blumhardt, the “gospel of Jesus Christ” has nothing to do with Christianity, Buddhism, or any other religion. “No longer religion against religion, but justice against sin, life against death.”

The reader will see that Blumhardt was quite critical of various missionary efforts precisely because they concerned themselves with spreading Christianity on a Western pattern, instead of representing the reality of God’s reign. Blumhardt’s understanding of Christian witness flew in the face of the concept of mission held by typical mission societies. It still flies in the face of so many missionary and evangelistic efforts today. For Blumhardt, new ways to demonstrate God’s love must always be sought; the thoughts printed here are a direct expression of that search for fresh paths.

## Everyone Belongs to God

Influenced by Blumhardt's down-to-earth message, Richard Wilhelm focused his efforts on improving the standard of living of those he worked with. This included establishing schools and hospitals, quite daring and novel at the time. Conflicts with the Missionary Society were inevitable. Unlike his peers, Wilhelm was simply not interested in propagating the Christian religion among pagans. Like Blumhardt, he viewed the noble manifestations of other religions without prejudice, even with reverence for God's work.

Admittedly, this sounds like the perfect recipe for syncretism or religious relativism, with Jesus' truth reduced to just one of many manifestations of truth. It is clear from these selections, however, that Blumhardt emphasizes the gospel of the kingdom – the revelation of God – as the supreme truth that fulfills humankind's deepest religious longings.

Blumhardt's thoughts and concerns are amazingly prescient. Long before terms like indigenization and contextualization became vogue, Blumhardt grasped that God's living Word always incarnates itself in earthly ways. In this sense, Blumhardt was a pioneer of a new kind of mission. And so his words speak directly

## *Introduction*

to our time, where we see so much Christian missionizing yet so little of God's transforming power.

As in Blumhardt's time, our world is in the throes of much ferment, and in the West in particular there is increasing cynicism and skepticism towards anything Christian. Elsewhere in the world, Christianity, with its many sects and denominations, is flourishing and, according to some, having a healthy liberalizing effect. But for Blumhardt, and for an increasing number of Christians today, such a phenomenon is not necessarily a good thing. Under the guise of religion, the gospel has not only become adulterated, but God's power to effect a radical change here on earth has been stifled.

The question today for those who seek to represent the gospel more authentically is: How do we bring the gospel of Christ to a world that is in the grip of capitalistic materialism, increasingly secular, and resentful of religious façades that perpetuate injustice, without spreading a Christianity that is little more than a pie-in-the-sky religion among a world of religions? How do we demonstrate the good news of Christ's victory over suffering and sin and demonic powers in this world where masses of

people are imprisoned in urban wastelands of poverty and despair? How can followers of Christ genuinely proclaim the new creation he promised when words, especially religious verbiage, have become cheap and when our lives and churches have so little to show?

Though his words may at times lack precision, Blumhardt clearly writes from a passionately moved heart. Theologically, there may be points with which one could take issue. Even his central assertions possess a remarkable duality, especially regarding the institutional church and the people of Christ, Christians and non-Christians, testimony by word and testimony by deed. Indeed, the wisdom he offers may at first appear “foolish” to those who demand theological exactitude.

A patient, generous reading of Blumhardt, however, should clear up any apparent contradictions. For instance, Blumhardt’s critical comments regarding baptism and the attempt to make people Christians do not preclude the practice of baptism nor the need for conversion. Similarly, Blumhardt affirms God’s working within history and culture, yet he is clear that civilization – with its technical, intellectual, and political development – is doomed without the truth that God revealed in Christ.

## *Introduction*

Blumhardt never claimed to be a scholar; he was a pastor at heart. Readers who long to faithfully stand their ground in the stream of the world as witnesses to God's coming kingdom will find no manufactured truths or artificial musings. For Blumhardt, making known the gospel was a matter of daring something in faith, of experimenting, and of finding new, concrete ways for God's kingdom to advance. His concern was that the message of Christ be brought to nations and peoples in a true, life-giving way, opening instead of closing doors to all those for whom Jesus died.

Blumhardt boldly believed that the earth and all its peoples belonged ultimately to God. He possessed an unwavering confidence in the advancement of God's new creation, even if it was "beneath the surface, in quiet, hidden ways." He held that in the midst of the storm and stress of world history, there have always been clearly recognizable signs of this clandestine advance. In an increasingly pluralistic world, the insights contained in this book can help us see the signs that are visible today – provided we are willing to have our conventional ideas challenged and our horizons broadened.

*Charles E. Moore*

# 1

## Keep the Kingdom in View

**In the kingdom of God** one cannot turn back. Therefore, strive for God's kingdom with every drop of your blood (Matt. 6:33–34). The work you or I do is incidental; we are only vessels of the Spirit that awaits the future of God. Think about it: the kingdom of God is in your midst – among a faithful people – and it alone will be the starting point from which the Savior leads his cause to victory. In all your work you must hold firmly to the thought that the kingdom of God is on the way. This hope is our motivation for all our work on behalf of the gospel; any progress we make stems from it.

This means that our practical activity should never be our chief concern. The worldly – and the world's religions – appear to be powerful and successful. We, on the other hand, are weak and easily pushed into a corner. Yet who is on firmer ground (1 Cor. 1:18–31)?

## Everyone Belongs to God

God's kingdom works in strange ways. Where is there a church, congregation, race, nation, or even a single person manifesting the kingdom of God today? Yet the kingdom of God is astir under the surface and spreads in new ways (Matt. 13:31–33). Now, more than ever, we must proclaim, "The Lord is at hand!" We are part of this, quietly and actively, through our faith and expectation. It is enough for us to know that God is weaving his design in the warp and weft of the world. His goal will be reached, not just for this or that person, but for everyone.

Where will the kingdom of God come from? Is not the entire history of the world a fulfillment of the promise? Are not bonds loosed, chains broken asunder? Who would have thought, for example, that new paths could open up for women as they have for men? Jesus lives, and he conquers more and more, although too many of us are unaware that he is behind it all. Of course, these developments do not of themselves represent a turning toward God, yet this practical liberation enables God's kingdom to break in among the people.

Only a very few people have a true and living hope for God's intervention. But there is a growing

## *Keep the Kingdom in View*

movement of the Spirit that runs throughout the world, and you must give yourself to it. The world is experiencing an immense transformation, and everything is being shaken up. And yet in the background there are quiet but powerful currents of peace, grace, and goodwill among people. God strides forward. The hidden Christ is at work (John 1:9). Keep this before your eyes! We are in the background, but our prayers, our faith, and our hope all play a part. Clearly, our lives should show that we must decrease, and he increase (John 3:30).

**The kingdom of God** has little in common with the world's religions. God only reveals himself as the one, holy God through the deeds of the Spirit, which no amount of piety or learning can replace. Our hope lies in the fact that Jesus, the son of God, lives *in* the world, not above it, even if he remains inconspicuous.

The Risen One wants to draw *all* people to himself (John 12:32), and so propaganda for a particular confession of faith or church is no concern of his. You must stand up and represent the gospel of the kingdom that shines for all people, no matter who they are.

Never forget that Jesus comes from and for the lowly; it is from their vantage point that he will illuminate the world (Luke 4:17–19). The expectation of redemption, the healing of societies and nations, the longing for God to bring about his heavenly kingdom on earth, the hope that the masters of capital will cease treating the masses as slaves – all this will unite us with the hearts of the humble and downtrodden. They especially will understand what we mean by God’s kingdom, even if they have never sought him.

As I see it, God’s wrath is sweeping over the Christian West precisely because a proud culture and pious Christianity have been pushed onto the people, while at the same time they are despised. To forget that all of us belong to God – whether pagan or Christian – is hardhearted and dishonest. The whole of Western civilization is tainted, much as the Romans were with their Caesars, regarding the rest of the world as dirt or as an opportunity for exploitation.

How can this go on? God must intervene and open our eyes; that is the only help I know of. The ruling prince of this world should not be allowed any more victories (1 John 3:8). He has trampled emerging humankind into the muck a hundred times already. He must no longer be allowed to do this.

## *Keep the Kingdom in View*

**In seeking God's kingdom** you must also seek his righteousness, his justice, and build on an economic foundation, not just a spiritual one (James 2:14–17). For it is on the material plane that Jesus is victorious on earth. The devil laughs up his sleeve at all our religious meetings and theology. Spiritual communities that fail to be a corrective in everyday life and practical work will soon end in a fiasco, be they Buddhist or Christian. There must be absolutely no Christian pretense, however religious it may appear, for lots of religious activity deprives people of their true life. People need to be guided properly through practical work, not through the might of weapons or proselytizing or religious fervor.

Someday, when God's kingdom conquers the earth, true piety will infuse hands-on activity and work (Eph. 4:28). For unity between people can only come about on the foundation of communal life. Think more deeply about this. In God's kingdom, Christian churches are done for, since they have become little more than egotistical worlds consisting of personal concerns that keep people apart. The misery of the masses can only be alleviated by forming associations of people who live by the Holy Spirit and freely lend practical help to one another. This, in the end, is the

surest way to influence those in power. A people's community that accomplishes something on the practical level will gain respect and authority among those who don't believe (Acts 2:44–47).

This may shock you, but we must preach that religious knowledge by itself is of no value. People should learn how to be truly active, especially with their neighbors, and to see to it that all have what they need to live a fruitful life. We need to keep the true goal in mind: the need of the world and the benefit of the people. That is the mind and spirit of Christ who reconciles all things. This is what we mean by seeking first the kingdom of God.

**It is a strange matter,** all this talk about everlasting life. To be honest, I don't trust those who always console people by pointing them to eternity. If we can't see any of God's help in *this* world, who can guarantee that there will be help in the next? Or did the Savior concern himself only with some heavenly realm? No! He came to *us* and dwelt among us. He showed us that the misery on earth will be eliminated once the barriers between time and eternity, between here and beyond, have been broken down. Through Christ a

## *Keep the Kingdom in View*

hole has been broken through from above down to us, not the other way around. So be on your guard. Today's Christianity has made all kinds of holes out of this world, falsely teaching that we can simply fly out of it, like pigeons, and be saved.

I know this will sound strange to many Christian ears, and even to those with whom you work. But what is the truth according to the Bible: our death and some afterlife, or the future of God's kingdom on the earth? The Bible, from its first to its last chapter, deals with the coming of God into this world. There is virtually nothing about dying and the next world. The Bible guarantees to us the deeds of God, here and now, where you and I live (Matt. 4:23–25).

**There's a lot of talk** about the world's dire social conditions and the needs that are all around us. It's amazing to think how many people still dream of a world in which there is true peace. Of course they are right to do so. But if the One who made the world and has our lives in his hand is not acknowledged, if we refuse to turn to him as the power and Lord we need for this, this dream is but a fantasy. Nothing will come of it. Set up governments based on the various

opinions of outstanding leaders who believe they have the answer. Let one be based on a communistic ideal; let one operate according to some benevolent, supreme authority, perhaps with a religious framework; or have one in which only the poor, the underclass, have anything to say, and nobody else. Pass as many laws as you like; you will still see the same awful mess we are in today. Apart from God's rulership we remain inwardly and outwardly unclear and cannot form a society of truth and justice.

The greatest obstacle to the kingdom of God, therefore, is not our social conditions but is in us and in our clever solutions. It is self-will that leads people to destruction (Rom. 1:18–32). In this regard, our Christian organizations are not very helpful. Much too much pride has crept into them. Unless we arrive at the point where we dispel the foggy atmosphere of human effort and humanly devised ideals, unless we confront our ego-driven lives and look clearly at ourselves and say, “Without Jesus, we are nothing,” we are lost (John 15:5).

**Remember,** there is no other purpose in your mission work than to proclaim God's kingdom and bring it to

## *Keep the Kingdom in View*

the people (Matt. 10:5–42). Take your stand, therefore, with faith, courage, and perseverance. God’s kingdom *will* come. Rather lose your life than give up this goal! Boldly persist and keep this divine end uppermost in your mind, so that those you work with may experience how God makes things right. Live in God’s splendor. Of course, this won’t happen unless you want it.

Will we preach a “heavenly” Christ for another two thousand years? What’s the use? Preach a “church” Christ? A “community” Christ? A “consoling” Christ? No good either. The renewal of this world will not happen. You must represent the living Christ who brings forth God’s justice on the earth. Keep seeking God’s kingdom in the love of Christ, and you will witness redemption in even the smallest matters. If you strive for God’s justice in the name of all who suffer, not just for a few, redemption will come.

## 2

# Avoid Being Religious

**So much missionary work** is now superfluous. I will put it even more strongly: most current missionary endeavors are dangerous, because they self-righteously attack the moral sensibilities and customs of the unbelieving. Western Christians have become the supreme moralists. But what do the “lost ones” among us really want? People everywhere are occupied with the question: How should we live our lives on this earth? But it’s no wonder they don’t expect any answers from religion. They even dread our Christian ideas, for instead of giving strength to live, they discourage; instead of freeing, they bind.

Our Christianity is not a living witness to the power of the truth, which could, if God’s rulership mattered to us, overcome the various values of this world, even honorable ones like those of Confucianism and Islam. Instead, our churches are shot through with so many

