

**Blumhardt Series**

Edited by Christian T. Collins Winn and Charles E. Moore



# **The Gospel of God's Reign**

Living for the Kingdom of God

Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt

# THE GOSPEL OF GOD'S REIGN

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Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt (1842–1919).  
Bruderhof Historical Archive, Walden, NY, USA.

## *Blumhardt Series*

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Christian T. Collins Winn and Charles E. Moore, editors

# The Gospel of God's Reign

*Living for the Kingdom of God*

CHRISTOPH FRIEDRICH BLUMHARDT

*Originally Selected and Arranged by* Eugen Jäckh

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and Charles E. Moore

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Dedicated to Eberhard Arnold (1883–1935)

*Humble witness to the coming future of God*  
*Matthew 7:21–23*

## Contents

Series Foreword, <i>Christian T. Collins Winn and Charles E. Moore</i>	· xi
Foreword, <i>Nathan R. Kerr</i>	· xiii
Acknowledgments, <i>Christian T. Collins Winn and Charles E. Moore</i>	· xvii
Introduction, <i>Christian T. Collins Winn</i>	· xix
1 God's Love	· 1
2 The Reign of God	· 14
3 The Living Christ	· 29
4 Our Savior King	· 51
5 God's People	· 58
6 The Way of the Cross	· 76
7 Hope and Expectation	· 96
Introduction to the 1922 German Edition, <i>Eugen Jäckh</i>	· 119
Scripture Index	· 127

## Series Foreword

THE *BLUMHARDT SERIES* SEEKS to make available for the first time in English the extensive oeuvre of Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805–1880) and Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt (1842–1919), two of the least well-known but influential figures of the latter-half of the nineteenth century. Their influence can be detected in a number of important developments in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestantism: the recovery of the eschatological dimension of Christianity and the kingdom of God; the recovery of an emphasis on holistic notions of spirituality and salvation; in the rise of faith-healing and later Pentecostalism; the convergence of socialism and the Christian faith; and the development of personalist models of pastoral counseling.

Their collected works make available their vast body of work to scholars, pastors, and laypeople alike with the aim of giving the Blumhardts a full hearing in the English language for the first time. Given the extent of their influence during the theological and religious ferment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it is believed that these sources will be of great interest to scholars of that period across various disciplines.

It is also true, however, that there is much spiritual and theological value in the witness of the Blumhardts. We hope that by making their witness more widely known in the English-speaking world the church at large will benefit.

The project outline is flexible, allowing for production of volumes that aim either in a scholarly direction or towards the thoughtful lay-reader. The emphasis will be to reproduce, with only slight modifications, the various German editions of the Blumhardts' works that have appeared since the late nineteenth century. A modest scholarly apparatus will provide contextual

## SERIES FOREWORD

and theologically helpful comments and commentary through volume introductions, footnotes, and appendices.

During their long ministries, the elder and younger Blumhardt found themselves called to serve as pastors, counselors, biblical interpreters, theologians, and even politicians. No matter the vocational context, however, both understood themselves as witnesses to the kingdom of God that was both already present in the world, but also breaking into the current structures of the world. Together they represent one of the most powerful instances of the convergence of spirituality and social witness in the history of the Christian church. It is the Series Editors' conviction that their witness continues to be relevant for the church and society today. We hope that the current series will give the Blumhardts a broader hearing in the English-speaking world.

Christian T. Collins Winn and Charles E. Moore

## Foreword

by Nathan R. Kerr

THOUGH HE IS PERHAPS best known to the English-speaking world for the critical influence his life and thought had upon the practical formation of the Bruderhof movement, Blumhardt's scholarly—that is, “academic”—renown has mostly turned on the influence his thought has had upon such theological luminaries as Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Emil Brunner. His uncanny awareness of the “paradox” of the gospel has ensured his place alongside Kierkegaard and Overbeck as one of the forerunners of the “dialectical” school that emerged in the wake of Barth's second *Epistle to the Romans*, and that determined the course of so much of twentieth-century theology. Even today, Blumhardt has been heralded as the great-grandfather of a particular mode of “apocalyptic” thought that has emerged in contemporary theology. Such academic interpretations ensure for us that Blumhardt really does have something important to say as a theologian. But by prescribing in advance a particular method or theory for reading Blumhardt, such can equally serve to forestall any possibility that some wayward “lay” reader might stumble upon a book like this and find within it intimations to a way of living and working that cannot be so theorized.

That Christoph Blumhardt lived and worked and wrote in such a way as to resist the kind of theoretical capture that reduces theology to a mere intellectual peddling of the gospel is too often not only forgotten but deliberately ignored. The conveniences of *academe* do not allow for the appalling possibility that God might act in ways entirely unintelligible to human reason, much less that God might act so as to free us to live as silent, but active witnesses to that unintelligibility. And yet, if the gospel is a *power* that is to be experienced and lived, and not simply a *message* that is to be

conceptualized and understood, as Blumhardt insists, we must admit that God might not only act against our own reason and expectations, but that faith in this God itself eschews understanding. “God has to be experienced. And whoever experiences him becomes speechless.” Any gospel that does not test to destruction our own human theories or ideologies, as well as the so-called “religious” customs and institutions that perpetuate them in the name of “Christianity,” is not the gospel of God’s kingdom in which Jesus Christ *alone* reigns as Lord.

In *The Gospel of God’s Reign* Blumhardt is not simply a pietistic thinker painfully groping his way toward various theological insights that came to be developed in the later “dialectical” theology and that are thoroughly theorized in contemporary “apocalyptic” thought. No, Blumhardt is speaking out of the conviction that true faith is born of the boundless love of God, not simply of theology and its various points of doctrine. As Blumhardt put it: “This is the gospel, ‘You are loved.’” Furthermore, insofar as the love of God is not a *thing*, but a *way* lived out in the person of Jesus Christ, so faith itself is a living out of this love: “To believe in Jesus, means to love.” No theological system can evoke this faith from us. Instead, this faith is a living response to the love of God in Christ whose work is precisely to deliver us from all false masters and human spheres of domination, by freeing us to love in the way of the cross.

Such faith comes to us only as God’s love in Christ brings about a new creation, which breaks into this world in such a way as to bring to naught the powers and principalities that hold us in bondage and decay. “When God’s love speaks, the world is made new. In Jesus Christ it will again be made new.” In Christ, everything about this sinful and dying world is judged and condemned, so that everything about this sinful and dying world might be forgiven and brought to new life. It is for this reason that faith in Jesus Christ is for Blumhardt faith in the resurrection. Only from within the event of the resurrection is it possible to proclaim that “Jesus is victor!” while also praying “Thy Kingdom Come!” Only from within the event of resurrection is it possible to acknowledge that human life is in contradiction—sinful and fallen under the conditions of this old age, yet free for the coming new creation. That is to say, only from within the event of the resurrection is it possible to speak at once dialectically and apocalyptically without submitting the gospel to either a dialectical *method* or an apocalyptic *theory*.

For in the end, what matters for Christoph Blumhardt is that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a reality here and now—that we experience its transforming power in the hope of Christ’s coming in glory, and then give ourselves to it by working and fighting to resist the ways in which the powers of this world continue to imprison, oppress, and marginalize those very persons whom God’s love in Christ has set free. As such, *The Gospel of God’s Reign* is not fundamentally a work of theology—not because Blumhardt doesn’t speak theologically, but because for Blumhardt the work of theology is to do nothing more and nothing less than to witness to the kind of existence facing the reader who would venture to live out this gospel in faith. The apocalyptic and even dialectical character of the gospel will not admit of any verification other than a life lived under the rule and reign of God, which means precisely in the life of that one reader who finds him or herself called to faith by the love of that God that is indeed witnessed to here in this text.

## Acknowledgments

THE EDITORS ARE INDEBTED to the Bruderhof Historical Archive, Walden, New York, USA, for providing original translated material, to Miriam Mathis for her painstaking work in translating and copyediting, to Jakob Gneiting for his ongoing commitment to keeping the witness of the Blumhardts alive, and to Dieter Ising and Ralf Breslau for their archival assistance.

## Introduction

*by Christian T. Collins Winn*

### **BLUMHARDT'S LIFE**

CHRISTOPH FRIEDRICH BLUMHARDT (1842–1919) has been called many things: pastor, prophet, politician, theologian, socialist, and faith-healer to name but a few, though he would have understood himself as simply a witness to the kingdom of God. Often called “Blumhardt the Younger,” Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt was born on June 1, 1842, to Johann Christoph (1805–1880) and Doris née Köllner Blumhardt (1816–1886) in the small village of Möttlingen just outside of Stuttgart. He was the third of eight children, though three of his siblings died in childbirth or at a very young age. Though Blumhardt was born in a typical farming village in Württemberg, it was during the most remarkable chapter of Möttlingen’s history. In 1841, a local villager, Gottliebin Dittus, approached Johann Christoph Blumhardt, or “Blumhardt the Elder,” complaining of “spiritual struggles,” which she was experiencing especially at night. Initially repelled by Dittus, the elder Blumhardt would eventually find himself drawn into a conflict that lasted almost two years, and that he became convinced was a case of demonic possession. The dramatic dénouement and crescendo of the episode occurred in December of 1843, when the demonic power purportedly shrieked “Jesus is the victor!” which Blumhardt later came to understand was a confession made in the presence of the living Christ, who had come to do battle with the nefarious power. These remarkable and

## INTRODUCTION

sensational events were followed by a regional revival, which lasted on and off for most of 1844.<sup>1</sup>

Though Christoph Blumhardt was but a small child, these events and the subsequent ministry of Blumhardt's father at Bad Boll constitute the imaginative and symbolic structure of the younger Blumhardt's theological world. Christoph grew up with the stories and personalities that had played a major role in the events at Möttlingen and was heir to the faith that those events had kindled. That faith, as expressed especially by the elder Blumhardt and summed up in the phrase "Jesus is the victor!" centered on the conviction that the kingdom of God, identified with the person of Jesus and the ministry of the Spirit, was a dynamic and living power that broke into history to set humanity free from spiritual and physical bondage. Under the influence of the eschatologically oriented Pietism of Württemberg, the elder Blumhardt articulated a vision of hope that had a chiliastic orientation—a hope for God's kingdom to be manifest in history and on the earth—though it was not captive to the temptation to develop timetables for the final return of Christ. Rather, Blumhardt's hope was focused especially on the "signs" of the kingdom's coming. That is, the elder Blumhardt was especially interested in how the small, ephemeral, and seemingly inconsequential moments of liberation that individuals and communities experienced were related to the definitive event of liberation described in Scripture as the "Day of the Lord."

For the elder Blumhardt, though the penultimate events of liberation and salvation were not to be confused with the final arrival of God's kingdom, they were nonetheless demonstrative signs or pointers. These, in turn, kindled hope and were intended to structure the life of discipleship such that the basic orientation of the Christian was "active prayer" for the coming kingdom, the final in-breaking of God's reign in which all things would be made right. "Active prayer" referred to the struggle that Christians were called to engage in on behalf of the coming kingdom. So, even though God brings both "signs of the kingdom" as well as the kingdom itself, the Christian community was called to struggle alongside God for the coming of God's kingdom. This struggle manifested itself not only in seeking healing through prayer, fasting, and worship, but also in and through active service,

1. See Dieter Ising, *Johann Christoph Blumhardt, Life and Work: A New Biography* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009) 140–227; and Friedrich Zündel, *Pastor Johann Christoph Blumhardt: An Account of His Life*, Blumhardt Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010) 117–297. See also Johann Christoph Blumhardt, *Blumhardt's Battle: A Conflict with Satan* (New York: Lowe, 1970).

works of mercy, and justice. All of these were tangible forms of witness to the coming kingdom, concrete enactments of the second petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come!"<sup>2</sup>

This was the faith and faith-community in which Christoph Blumhardt was nurtured. Although he studied theology at Tübingen from 1862 to 1866, the greatest influence on him was undoubtedly his father and the spiritual community of Bad Boll.<sup>3</sup> Christoph, however, did not simply repeat his father's thought and ministry. After his father's death in 1880, he took over as spiritual leader of the community at Bad Boll. But in the late 1880s, coinciding with the death of the last participants in the Möttlingen "Kampf," Blumhardt began to undergo a profound change.

The passing of the Möttlingen generation led Blumhardt to consider the ephemeral nature of the Möttlingen experience itself. Rather than it representing the last, penultimate sign of God's in-breaking—which he felt was his father's position—it too was but a weigh-station. What was needed was a retooling to discern where and how God was now at work in history. This reconsideration led Blumhardt to conclude that the kingdom of God was breaking into the world in new and different ways and in particular in the cry for social justice coming out of the Workers' Movement taking place throughout Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth century. For the elder Blumhardt, "Jesus is the victor!" included the *healing of the body*; for Christoph it now included the *healing of the body politic*. Thus Christoph began to envision the struggle for God's kingdom as a fight with the powers and principalities that were embedded in social and political structures. As Eugen Jäckh notes in the original introduction to the present work, the most decisive shift in this direction occurred between 1896 and 1899. The present collection is comprised of excerpts drawn mostly from that period.<sup>4</sup>

2. For a discussion of this, see Christian T. Collins Winn, "Jesus is Victor!" *The Significance of the Blumhardts for the Theology of Karl Barth*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 93 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009) 151–54.

3. Martin Stober offers the most complete analysis of this period of Blumhardt available to date. See his *Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt d.J. zwischen Pietismus und Sozialismus* (Giessen: Brunnen, 1998) 52–207, 259–71.

4. Jäckh's comments here need to be supplemented with the acknowledgment that some of Blumhardt's most significant "rethinking" actually occurred from 1890 to 1895 and finds expression in his *Gedanken aus dem Reich Gottes*, which was written at the end of these seminal five years. See Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt, *Damit Gott kommt: "Gedanken aus dem Reich Gottes,"* edited by W. J. Bittner (Giessen: Brunnen, 1992).

## INTRODUCTION

Blumhardt's new-found social orientation would lead him to the controversial decision to join the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in 1899, which he would eventually represent in the Württemberg *Landtag* or regional legislature from 1900 to 1906. As a representative, Blumhardt dealt mostly with issues of wage increases, trade tariffs, and education, though he also gave public lectures to church groups, explaining his understanding of the relationship between socialism and the kingdom of God.<sup>5</sup> Socialism was for Blumhardt both a sign of God's judgment on a culture that worshipped mammon instead of God,<sup>6</sup> as well as a sign of hope in which all people, but especially the poor, would share in the blessings of a transformed world under the reign of God.<sup>7</sup> Though explicitly atheistic, Blumhardt argued that the goals of socialism were a kind of sign of God's kingdom making itself present here on earth. In this sense, the socialists in their search for justice and relief for the poor were more Christian than many Christians. He thus envisioned his political work as a new form, but coextensive with what his father experienced, of the active struggle for the kingdom of God to emerge in history.

By 1903, however, Blumhardt's view of the SPD had considerably cooled due in large measure to internal party politics, and especially the personal attacks that Blumhardt was the target of during debates over Eduard Bernstein's revisionist program.<sup>8</sup> In 1905, due to failing health and

5. Most of Blumhardt's political speeches, as well as his speeches to Christian groups, have been preserved in vol. 2 of Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt, *Ansprachen, Predigten, Reden, Briefe: 1865–1917*, edited by J. Harder (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1978).

6. "Capitalism is the last enemy, mammonism. It kills . . . with *mammonism* everything now hits the mark. This is the anti-god, which can only be conquered by God" (Blumhardt, *Ansprachen*, 264).

7. "Whoever looks into the elements of social democracy and into the ideas which necessarily derive from it must recognize that a follower of Christ can very well empathize with it, actually more than with other political parties . . . A different order of society is sought for the sake of those who labor and are heavy-laden, for the sake of the outcasts and the downtrodden, for the sake of the infirm" (Christoph Blumhardt, *Eine Auswahl aus seinen Predigten, Andachten und Schriften*, edited by R. Lejune [Zürich: Rotapfel, 1936] 3:449).

8. For a discussion of the turbulent debates within the SPD over Bernstein's revisionism, see Carl Schorske, *German Social Democracy 1905–1917: The Development of the Great Schism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955). Blumhardt came under fire for being sympathetic with Bernstein's revisionism. Though he had initially rejected Bernstein's program, after the personal attacks that Blumhardt experienced in November 1904, he came to see that his own position had more in common with Bernstein than he originally thought. See Klaus-Jürgen Meier, *Christoph Blumhardt: Christ, Sozialist*,

a more pessimistic view of party politics, Blumhardt decided to withdraw from public political life. Though Blumhardt placed less and less stress on political activity, he nonetheless remained committed to socialism until his death in 1919, believing that, at least in terms of its goals, it was indeed an anticipatory sign of God's coming kingdom.

In 1906, during a trip to Palestine, Blumhardt contracted malaria, which proved to be debilitating, further deepening his withdrawal from public life. Even out of the public eye, however, Blumhardt continued to exert influence through his publications and ministry at Bad Boll. His vision of the kingdom of God would prove to have a great appeal to a number of twentieth-century theological luminaries, most notably Karl Barth (1886–1968).<sup>9</sup> Blumhardt suffered a stroke in October 1917, which left him partially paralyzed, though he continued to attend services at Bad Boll. He passed away on August 2, 1919.

## BLUMHARDT'S THOUGHT

Blumhardt's thought is probably best described as a form of "kerygmatic theology." "Kerygma" is the New Testament word for "proclamation."<sup>10</sup> We use this descriptor for Blumhardt's thought first to refer to the lyrical, aphoristic, and sermonic quality of his theological ruminations. His oeuvre is nothing more than a vast collection of sermons, table-talk, letters, poetry, hymns, pastoral counseling, biblical commentary, autobiographical and biographical reflection, and a few public speeches. In fact, the *Gedanken aus dem Reich Gottes* constitutes the only sustained theological work that Blumhardt ever produced, and it is hardly a theological treatise.<sup>11</sup> The descriptor "kerygmatic theology" also evokes the practical, earthy everydayness that

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*Theologe*, Basler und Berner Studien zur historischen und systematischen Theologie 40 (Bern: Lang, 1979) 107–10.

9. For a discussion of this influence, see Collins Winn, "Jesus is Victor!"; see also Markus Mattmüller, "Der Einfluss Christoph Blumhardts auf schweizerische Theologen des 20. Jahrhunderts," *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik* 12 (1968) 233–46.

10. See Colin Brown, "Proclamation, Preach, Kerygma," in Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 3:44–68.

11. For an analysis of this text, see Collins Winn, "Jesus is Victor!," 129–36; and Simeon Zahl, *Pneumatology and Theology of the Cross in the Preaching of Christoph Blumhardt: The Holy Spirit between Wittenberg and Azusa Street* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2010) 61–84.

## INTRODUCTION

marks most of Blumhardt's reflection and writing. His theology was forged in the heat of battle, whether pastoral, political, or personal, and this gives it a fresh quality and electric verve that still comes through today, a spiritual intensity that continues to feed those in need of nourishment. This quality also gives his thought a provisional and irreducible quality. The provisional character of his work refers to the constant need for theological supplementation, extension, elaboration, and clarification that confronts the reader of his works, while the irreducible character of his thought refers to the strange contexts and experiences in which Blumhardt's theological imagination was forged. Both Blumhardts understood themselves as witnesses of the in-breaking kingdom of God, and their witness and subsequent theological reflection retains an original, irreducible character.

But "kerygmatic theology" also refers to the non-systematic nature of Blumhardt's thought. One will find in his work theological themes and theses that stand in dialectical tension with no attempt to find resolution. The term "kerygmatic," then, is meant to evoke the sense of a loosely connected set of theological convictions that when assembled present a relatively coherent theology, a kind of theological constellation meant to provide orientation and guidance—though by no means a full-scale theological *mappamundi* (world map), since it retains persistent gaps, *aporia*, and even downright contradictions within the overarching unity.

That constellation of thought is established by two distinct poles, each of which is summed up in a kerygmatic slogan: "Jesus is victor!" and "Thy kingdom come!" Following in the wake of his father's thought, though with his own particular twist, Jesus' victory represents the pole of *divine action* in Blumhardt's thought. In other words, "Jesus is victor!" refers to the active presence of the living Christ, which is continuously invading the world of sin to free humanity and creation from its bondage to death, both spiritually and materially.<sup>12</sup> Blumhardt identifies this active presence with the kingdom of God. Jesus is the *auto basilea*: Jesus and the kingdom are functionally synonymous. Significantly, Blumhardt does not imagine Jesus or the kingdom as symbolic ciphers into which one can put any kind of content. Nor is it an ideal. Rather, the "kingdom" is to be understood according to the lines of the narrated life of Jesus as found in the biblical witness.<sup>13</sup> As such, in the moments of "in-breaking" there is both an element

12. Blumhardt's emphasis on the overthrow of death is especially prevalent in the *Gedanken aus dem Reich Gottes*. See *Damit Gott kommt*, 200–212.

13. See Collins Winn, "Jesus is Victor!," 117–28; see also Gerhard Sauter, *Die Theologie*

of judgment and an element of reconciliation, which correspond roughly to the cross and the resurrection. That is why Christoph can be both prophetic and conciliatory in his preaching and analysis of contemporary events.

A key shift occurs in the younger Blumhardt's understanding of "Jesus is victor!" vis-à-vis his father. For his father, the living Christ not only forgave sins but also brought healing to the physical or psychical body. The son agreed with this, but extended it to the social realm. Contained within this extension was Christoph's conviction that social systems are also under the thrall of death and in need of liberation. The liberating work of Jesus, exemplified above all in his resurrection from the dead, is one that is to be universally extended to the nations, including the mundane social life of the peoples of the earth. This emphasis is especially pronounced during Christoph's direct engagement with the SPD and the Workers' Movement (1899–1906), though one can already detect components of this shift as early as 1895 in the later sections of the *Gedanken aus dem Reich Gottes*.

Sin and death are spiritual as well as social and systemic realities, but so also is the resurrection power of Jesus and the Spirit of God. For Blumhardt, God seeks a people who will struggle for the healing, resurrection power of the kingdom to be let loose in the cosmos. This people, who are both a product of God's calling and a result of genuine human response, constitutes the second key pole in Blumhardt's theology, exemplified in the watchword "Thy kingdom come!" God breaks into the world, but it is also incumbent on humanity to pray for God to act.<sup>14</sup>

Both the elder and the younger Blumhardt offered extensive commentary on the nature and practice of prayer.<sup>15</sup> Prayer is a complex and comprehensive act. At its most basic level, however, prayer is the straightforward act of "calling out" to God to act. The Christian life as a whole is itself an act of prayer, and in that act those who pray—or rather groan—hold creation up before the living God to ask God to renew and restore the earth.<sup>16</sup> Prayer, however, consists not simply of words, but of action.

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*des Reiches Gottes beim älteren und jüngeren Blumhardt*, Studien zur Dogmengeschichte und systematischen Theologie 14 (Zürich: Zwingli, 1962) 24–45.

14. "All the great things which are to come, we shall already experience today quite certainly in all their glory if we pray and do not falter. But without prayer they will not come" (Christoph Blumhardt, "Our Human Right," in R. Lejeune, ed., *Christoph Blumhardt and His Message* [Rifton, NY: Plough, 1963] 218).

15. See, for example, Johann Christoph Blumhardt, *Das Vaterunser* (Basel: Basler Missionsbuchhandlung, 1946).

16. See Christoph Blumhardt, *Action in Waiting* (Farmington, PA: Plough, 1998) 99.

## INTRODUCTION

Christoph described prayer as “active waiting” toward the kingdom of God.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately only God’s power can truly make a difference. Thus, we wait for God. But our waiting is also a hastening, for we are called to live out our faith in an anticipatory way: “Waiting means *action*—invading the shadows, surrounded by the most awful death, amid the angriest and most fearful clamor; for that is where the Day of the Son of Man is to break in!”<sup>18</sup> Thus, as we pray for the kingdom of God to come we anticipate the justice, peace, and reconciliation of the kingdom through concrete deeds of struggle, especially on behalf of the poor and oppressed. In keeping with his faith that only God’s action will finally be decisive, our struggles for righteousness must always point beyond themselves. Though they may address the ills and misery we confront in the here and now, they achieve only relative success. Prayerful action therefore calls us to long and hope for the final coming when God alone will make right all wrongs. Our endeavors for justice, peace, and reconciliation in contemporary society can only function as sign-posts, pointing us toward God’s final future. Nevertheless, for Blumhardt these deeds of hope help to draw the coming of the kingdom into history. Christoph also placed great weight on the fact that our calling to pray and to hope for the kingdom of God is a call to hope for God’s mercy for all of humanity and the whole of creation. One prays on behalf of all people and all of creation, just as one works for social justice for all (even those who do not know or want to know Christ).

As described above, Blumhardt’s “kerygmatic theology” offers a remarkably holistic understanding of the Christian gospel. Rooted in prayer, biblical reflection, practical living, and action, his witness contains an invitation to think, hope, pray, and act in the light of the coming kingdom of God. These are the defining marks of the church here on earth. Even if we don’t always find ourselves in agreement with Blumhardt—needing perhaps to revise or reformulate this or that conception—nevertheless, for those with ears to hear what he seeks to express, the witness of Blumhardt will inspire and set in motion those who long for the coming of the kingdom of God.

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For a more extensive discussion of this aspect of the Blumhardts, see Christian T. Collins Winn, “Groaning for the Kingdom of God: Spirituality, Social Justice and the Witness of the Blumhardts,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 6/1 (2013) 56–75.

17. See, for example, Christoph Blumhardt, *Eine Auswahl*, 4:9–16.

18. *Ibid.*, 4:14. Admittedly, Blumhardt would often go back and forth regarding the nature of “waiting,” sometimes emphasizing stillness, and at other times emphasizing radical action. See Zahl, *Pneumatology and Theology of the Cross*, 74–76, 133–36.

## VOM REICH GOTTES: HISTORY AND RECEPTION

*Vom Reich Gottes*<sup>19</sup> (*On the Kingdom of God*) was the brainchild of Eberhard Arnold, founder of the Bruderhof, and the editorial handiwork of Eugen Jäckh, Blumhardt's pastoral assistant and executor of Blumhardt's literary estate. In 1920, as Arnold was preparing to leave the Furche Publishing House to work with Otto Herpel and the Neuwerk-Verlag, he was already envisioning a series of volumes, including one on Blumhardt.<sup>20</sup> In the summer of 1921, Jäckh visited Arnold and the budding Bruderhof community in Sannerz, northeast of Frankfurt. Confessing that he felt a "spirit of kinship" with Arnold, Jäckh, along with Anna von Sprewitz, immediately set to work on the volume.<sup>21</sup> Over the course of the fall of 1921, the project ballooned into two short works, *On the Kingdom of God (Vom Reich Gottes)* and *On Following Jesus Christ (Von der Nachfolge Jesu Christi*<sup>22</sup>). Because *Vom Reich Gottes* was intended as an initial introduction of Blumhardt to the wider German public, Jäckh's introduction was included, and has been retained in the present edition as well.<sup>23</sup> *Vom Reich Gottes* was published in the spring of 1922 by the Neuwerk-Verlag, and was followed a year later by *Von der Nachfolge Jesu Christi*, which was published by the Furche-Verlag.

Both volumes were very successful, enjoying multiple printings during the 1920s and 1930s. Through these volumes, figures like Dietrich Bonhoeffer were introduced to Blumhardt's vision of the kingdom of God and his conception of discipleship.<sup>24</sup> In April 1940 Christoph Blumhardt's

19. Schlüchtern: Neuwerk, 1922.

20. See Markus Baum, *Against the Wind: Eberhard Arnold and the Bruderhof* (Farmington PA: Plough, 1998) 127–28, 147–48.

21. Eugen Jäckh to Eberhard Arnold, August 18, 1921 (unpublished letter; Bruderhof Historical Archive, Walden, NY, USA).

22. Berlin: Furche, 1923.

23. It should be noted here that Jäckh was aware—and critical—of Leonhard Ragaz's Blumhardt volume, *Der Kampf um das Reich Gottes in Blumhardt Vater und Sohn—und weiter* (Erlenbach-Zürich: Rotapfel, 1922). It is probable that he was made aware of the book because of Ragaz's extensive engagement with Blumhardt in the January 1921 edition of *Neue Wege*, the literary organ of the Swiss Religious Socialists edited by Ragaz. For Jäckh's awareness of Ragaz's book, see Eugen Jäckh to Eberhard Arnold, December 23, 1921 (unpublished letter; original in the Bruderhof Historical Archive, Walden, NY, USA). For a brief description of Ragaz's engagement with Blumhardt in the January 1921 edition of *Neue Wege*, see Mattmüller, "Der Einfluß Christoph Blumhardts auf schweizerische Theologen des 20. Jahrhunderts," 240–41.

24. See Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness, Arise! God's Future for Humanity and the Earth* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010) 233n1. *Von der Nachfolge Jesu Christi* is one of

## INTRODUCTION

works were outlawed by the Nazi Propaganda Ministry.<sup>25</sup> Here again, *Vom Reich Gottes* played a role, albeit a small one. In 1939 a new edition of the book was released, presumably under the urging of Jäckh.<sup>26</sup> On March 22, 1941, Jäckh received a letter from the Furche Publishing House in Berlin, along with a copy of the 1939 edition of *Vom Reich Gottes*. The letter indicates that the copy sent to Jäckh, “had to be presented to the Ministry of Propaganda” and bore the pencil marks of the ministry reviewer.<sup>27</sup> Next to passages like “As Christians we must expect God’s kingdom—the reign of God on earth. Yes, even more than that, we must actively concern ourselves with it” and “Christ came so that God’s lordship is acknowledged here on earth, so that his will is done on earth as it is in heaven” are clearly discernible pencil marks, indicating those points of Blumhardt’s message deemed incompatible with Nazi ideology.

## THE PRESENT TEXT

The present volume is a recombination of the contents of both *Vom Reich Gottes* and *Von der Nachfolge Jesu Christi* in the attempt to capture the original vision that animated Arnold and Jäckh.<sup>28</sup> Some slight rearrangement has occurred, as the editors have inserted the three chapters from *Nachfolge* in between the third and fourth chapters of the original version of *Vom Reich Gottes* and have included Jäckh’s original introduction as an appendix. With this new arrangement, it also seemed worthwhile to rename the volume, *The Gospel of God’s Reign: Living for the Kingdom of God*, in an attempt to highlight that Blumhardt’s message is far more practical than theoretical.

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the books in the Bonhoeffer Nachlass (Nr. 299, Signatur: 5 C 10) housed at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. Thanks to Ralf Breslau for this reference.

25. The order to cease publications was issued on April 26, 1940 (Original in the *Landeskirchliche-Archiv*, Stuttgart, Germany [LKA Stuttgart, D51]).

26. Eberhard Arnold had passed away on November 22, 1935. See Baum, *Against the Wind*, 252.

27. Furche-Verlag to Eugen Jäckh, March 22, 1941 (unpublished letter; original in the *Landeskirchliche-Archiv*, Stuttgart, Germany [LKA Stuttgart, D34, Bd. 88.2, Nr. 224]). Thanks to Dieter Ising for making a scanned copy of this available.

28. Even after Jäckh proposed a two-volume structure for the project, Arnold had serious reservations, because he felt that, without having all of the material together, the fullness of Blumhardt’s vision would remain unexpressed. Eberhard Arnold to Eugen Jäckh, December 30, 1921 (unpublished letter; original in the Bruderhof Historical Archive, Walden, NY, USA).

The translation is the work of the Bruderhof community, especially Miriam Mathis. The Bruderhof, more than any other group, has been the central conduit through which the witness of both Blumhardts has been brought into the English-speaking world. It is therefore fitting that *The Gospel of God's Reign* should be the second volume in the *Blumhardt Series*, given its deep connection to the founder of the Bruderhof community and movement, Eberhard Arnold. It is to Eberhard Arnold that this volume is dedicated.

## God's Love

WHO CAN PREACH THE gospel with any semblance of hope if they do not know what God's love is in Christ Jesus? We are submerged in utter darkness. Our little bit of Christian culture is hardly enough to keep our heads above water. We are stuck deep in a morass of satanic and human affairs that hate the Lord Jesus. Jesus can "save" us when we die, but we think that on earth he should leave us in peace. Down here we have our customs and laws that can't be altered. However, the salient question is: "Can people dedicate themselves to God while they are still on earth?" If not, then the whole universe was created in vain. That's just why Jesus came, and that's just why we must do our part by saying, "Who shall separate us from the love of God?" (Rom 8:35).

What then is God's love? God's love is that he sent his Son to godless men and women with a definite promise, "Christ is the light of the world."

He brings peace on earth. It is through him that God's will shall be accomplished both for the individual and for the whole world. God's love is as broad and as great as humankind itself; it is as high and as deep as our misery, and more powerful than death—even unto the depths of the earth.



The world is a reality and can be overcome only by a reality.



## THE GOSPEL OF GOD'S REIGN

To have faith means to feel God's presence.



The real meaning of faith is not a matter of reciting a Confession. Faith means to believe that something will happen, to believe that Jesus wants something of us, to believe that God's love can do something.



Knowledge of God must be experienced. You can never "study" God. If you know something of God and his love, you are greatly pained when people only philosophize about him. You think, "If you only knew whom you are talking about, whom you are dissecting, you would turn white with horror!" God has to be experienced. And whoever experiences him becomes speechless.



Don't place yourself above God with your intellect. Rather, put yourself beneath him with your heart. I pity people who find it so hard to have faith. Don't expect too much from them. We force on them too much that has become only history. Nowadays people seem to consider only with their heads whether they can believe. Their hearts are empty.

We have to come away from this intellectual religion that makes faith hard for people. Whatever makes your heart bow down before God's holy love is more important than anything you can grasp with your intellect. Forget about anything that does not touch your heart! But hold on to anything that sanctifies you, so that your heart becomes still before God. Not even the evil one can take that away from you.

Our hearts must open up to God once more. That's why we pray for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. People no longer have a feeling for God. We cannot expect anything from them that goes against the way they were brought up, anything that goes against their culture or customs. But this feeling for God, this sense of God's love, is the first blessing we should seek to find for ourselves. There are many other blessings, but we must

not want the last blessing first. If we can just take hold of this one blessing—the knowledge of God himself—then we shall proceed from blessing to blessing.



There is a kind of disbelief that comes from reverence. The Apostle Thomas had too much respect for God simply to “believe.” He knew that something as great as the resurrection could not just be believed as a matter of course. Many people cannot conceive that God would answer prayers—*but perhaps they are more devout than those who take it for granted that God answers prayers.*



We human beings are always in love with ourselves and with our own thoughts and ways. We draw God down into our affairs, but always on our own terms. We think that God should act on our ideas, that Christ should come the way we want to go. This is why there are such terrible tensions between Christian denominations and sects. Our human thoughts are stubborn—they make us rigid. For decades and centuries people keep going on in the same way, until finally they become hardened and cannot think otherwise. People become frozen in the ice of their own thoughts and ways.

God speaks out against this again and again and wants to tear us out of this condition. This is why the Savior speaks so sharply. He asks for judgment to help us glorify God's name. He calls forth events that throw our thoughts and wishes overboard. And so, according to God's will, time repeatedly sweeps over all our sterile thoughts. Nations and churches must collapse so that room is made for the thoughts of God.



God's love is the key to the world we live in, the answer for those who seek for the truth. The world does not see God, but God sees the world, and whoever belongs to God also sees life in the world. And that life is the light of men.



We dare not start with ourselves and say, "Jesus is my Savior—therefore he has also come to save the world." It is the other way around: "God so loved the world—therefore he also loves me. Jesus came to the world—therefore he also comes to me."



No matter how high heaven is above earth, God showers his grace upon those who fear him. Though heaven is very high—and just because it is so high—it is near to us. The highest can become the nearest. We need something above us, which—precisely because it is above us—can illuminate things down to the smallest details. God's grace and goodness have to be very high so that we cannot tamper with them and so they can penetrate everything with light.

Many people would like God to be closer to them. They seek arduously for a relationship with God such as they may have with people. But even among people it is not good to come too close to each other—there are so many misunderstandings. Our spiritual worth and good qualities cannot develop freely if we come too near to each other socially. It would be all the more awkward, if God wanted to mix among us. He has to remain above for the sake of his love. As long as sin is among us, he must stay high above us.

Even Jesus has to be high above us in order to be near us. For, while on earth he was always eminent. He is high and exalted, but as such he is our neighbor. Being high above, he can approach all people and they can become one under him.



From every pulpit and on every mission field it should be proclaimed: "You all belong to God! Whether you are godless or devout, under judgment or under grace, blessed or damned, you belong to God, and God is good and wants what is best for you. Whether you are dead or alive, righteous or unrighteous, in heaven or in hell, you belong to God, and as soon as you are swept into the current of faith, the good within you will emerge." Preach like this and you will have different results from those who preach the truncated gospel that gives with one hand and takes away with the other.

If only Christian wrath could be driven from our hearts once and for all! If only the passion for judgment and damnation would stop! If only we

would learn to see sin as a disease and to separate the sinner from the sin! Our faith must be a light from God that draws people into the stream of faith. Then the most godless will become righteous.

God loved us even when we were his enemies. If God loved you when you were still a sinner and drew you into the stream that led you to himself, then how can you damn others? Surely it is only a matter of time before they will also enter the current of faith. But if we throw obstacles into the stream, if we have “Christian” or religious misgivings, how can there ever be a current that sweeps up other people?



All of us belong to God. That is the gospel. Once this good news is understood, sin falls away. The gospel must no longer be combined with threats. We cannot lay any obligations on people—unless they have already come to God. If we want to be true evangelists of the gospel to those who are bound, then the gospel must be, as with Paul, a power from God, not a speech or a command. The gospel is a power, not merely a message. Therefore we must keep it pure. To combine the gospel with threats makes it unclean; light and darkness get mixed. The apostles’ message was pure; it was those who came later who added threats to it.

God’s original message was, “You belong to God.” God defends the rights of humanity. God is love. In other words, he cannot accept the thought of even one single person not belonging to him. Right now people live in darkness, but they will all be freed. That is why we, too, must also defend this right for every person. To condemn anyone upholds the power of sin and death. As soon as you condemn someone, you deny God a certain right. You must commit each person to God’s care and keep him in mind as one for whom God’s right will also come to light, or you are not a disciple of Jesus. And you must believe the same for yourself. That is the gospel.



Our righteousness consists in this, that we belong to God our Father, and that we look upon ourselves as belonging to God the Father. This is the essence of true human nature. Even to a person in hell you must repeat: “You belong to the heavenly Father!” He who no longer counts himself as God’s is unrighteous, but as soon as he realizes that he belongs to God, he regains

