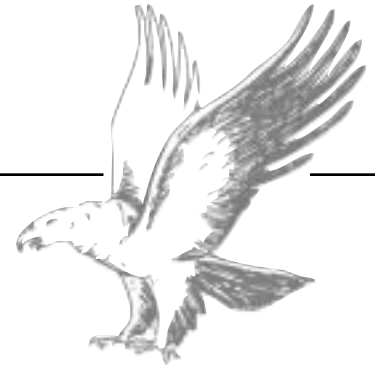


Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



January 16, 2011

Think Heaven, Improve the World

Christianity gets a bad rap for being too focused on the next life, while ignoring the problems of this life. On the contrary, we can't improve this life without anticipating the next.

“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth” (Col. 3:1-2).

Christians are often accused of having an other-worldly perspective that blinds them to the affairs of this life. According to this view, Christians go through life with a starry-eyed fixation on “pie in the sky in the sweet by and by,” and feel no urgency to address the pressing problems that afflict humanity here and now. With its emphasis on heaven as the ultimate goal of human endeavor, Christianity is seen as an impediment to human improvement, not an aid. Sadly, these critics can point to some professed Christians who do seem to have a detached, complacent attitude about life and social responsibility.

Furthermore, passages such as this one from Colossians seem to support this complaint. If Christians have their minds set on heavenly things rather than the things of this earth, what's the motivation to get involved in improving man's lot on this earth?

This cynical view of Christianity -- and the lazy version of faith that feeds it -- misreads the connection between the Christian's hope of eternal life and the earthly life that precedes it. A closer look at our opening text and the verses that follow reveals an integrated system of thought and behavior that profoundly influences earthly life for the better, based largely on the expectation of a better life in the hereafter.

Let's do a quick review of what it means to “set your minds on things above.” It means no fornication, no unbridled passion, and no covetousness (v. 5); in other words, a commitment to use our bodies for a more noble purpose than merely fulfilling selfish appetites. In our relationships with others, this heavenly vision inspires us to replace anger, malice, and dishonesty with kindness, humility, forgiveness, and love (compare v. 8-9 with 12-14). And these courtesies are to be extended not just to our own little clique, but to all mankind, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or social class (v. 11).

To the extent that people implement these heavenly ideals in their attitudes and behaviors, it will have a pro-

found impact on the quality of their marriage and family life (v. 18-21). Even the workplace will be transformed from an environment of demeaning drudgery to one of mutual respect (v. 22-25 and 4:1).

Notice that all these improvements in social interaction can be achieved without a single act of Congress or royal decree. The beauty of Christianity is its power to change people from the inside out, rather than forcing them to act against their will. And the hope of eternal life is a huge part of that equation. Convince people that their eternal destiny is influenced by the life they live here, out of a sense of gratitude rather than compulsion, and they will find all the motivation they need to improve their own behavior and help others along the way.

Properly understood and applied, Christianity is not an impediment to human progress. Quite the opposite, it is ideally suited to addressing all the needs of mankind, both as individuals and collectively. And it all begins with persuading people, without coercing them, that they have something to look forward to in heaven.

- David King