

Focus on the Kingdom

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Anthony Buzzard, editor

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“A transcendental sphere of existence, such as we conceive of ‘heaven’ could not occur to the Israelite” (A.B. Davidson, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 414).

“Heaven in the Bible is nowhere the destination of the dying” (J.A.T. Robinson, *In the End God*, p. 104).

“Heaven as the future abode of believers: this conception is conspicuous by its absence from Paul’s thought” (*Hasting’s Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*, Vol. I, p. 531).

Yet “heaven” as the destination of post-mortem souls is the standard fare of nearly all churchgoers who listen to sermons week by week. “Heaven” language is constantly repeated in church circles, providing a barrage of propaganda. The critical word “Kingdom” has been dropped from churchgoers’ vocabulary with incalculable loss of understanding of Jesus and the Gospel. The dying in the Bible do not “go to heaven.” They hope to inherit the Kingdom of God via resurrection when Jesus comes back (I Cor. 15:23). In a church instructed by Jesus members would speak the language of Jesus and talk of “inheriting the earth” (Matt. 5:5).

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Cause for Alarm

I recently went browsing on the Internet to find out what the churches and ministries think the Gospel is. There are countless presentations of the Gospel available, but with a very few exceptions the samples I tested give rise to concern.

Many of the sites began with such words as “There is widespread confusion amongst Christians even about what the Gospel is...” But the remedy offered was less than satisfactory for this one reason: On almost no occasion were *the words of Jesus* appealed to for a definition of the Gospel.

Imagine it. Hundreds of earnest presenters of the Gospel do not resort to the words of Jesus to define the Gospel!

Anyone joining my search for information about the most crucial of all questions, what is the Gospel, would be struck by this amazing fact: Apparently ministries and churches do not think Jesus was the author of the Gospel.

The main purpose of our magazine is to call your attention to this dreadful situation and invite you to take steps to put things right, both for yourself and for your friends.

Is there any possible justification for the appalling fact that Jesus is not thought to be the principal exponent of the Gospel? In Scripture, none whatsoever. There appears to have fallen over churches an inexplicable blindness to the

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most obvious of biblical facts: Jesus came preaching the GOSPEL. Listen to him: Luke 4:43: “I must preach the Gospel about the Kingdom of God to the other cities also; that is the reason why God commissioned me.”

Matthew, Mark and Luke could not have gone to greater lengths to inform us that Jesus was the great evangelist. To him we must look if we want to be informed and reformed by the saving Gospel. John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, came “preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom” (see Matt. 3:2). Jesus came preaching exactly the same message: “Repent because the Kingdom of God/Heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:23). “Believe the Gospel about the Kingdom of God” (Mark 1:14, 15). “From the time of John the Baptist the Gospel of the Kingdom of God has been preached” (Luke 16:16). “When anyone hears the Word/Gospel about the Kingdom of God...” (Matt. 13:19). “This Gospel about the Kingdom will be preached in all the world and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14).

It is a biblical fact that hearing the Gospel means hearing the Message of the Good News *about the Kingdom*. “Believe that Gospel of the Kingdom,” Jesus declares, in the summary statement of his whole ministry (Mark 1:14, 15).

We invite our listeners to consider a crisis situation in churches. The facts are that the Gospel as Jesus preached it is not the Gospel offered by the churches. Is this not cause for utmost concern? Can we be deceived? Surely the Bible is full of such warnings. Have we really conducted a Berean exercise in our search for the True saving Message? It would appear not.

Do not by any means take it from us. Proceed to the Internet and see for yourself. Ask in a variety of circles for a definition of the Gospel and wait for a response. Do not ask in a way to condemn, but seek to be informed. Ask respectfully. But if your correspondent turns to the opening of the ministry of Jesus to define the Gospel, we think you will have met a rare

person. Let us know what you find. We will publish the results.

Hebrew 2:3 states that the Gospel of salvation “first began to be preached by the Lord.” Romans 10:17 declares that faith is awakened by contact with the Message of the Messiah — Jesus’ own Gospel preaching relayed first by the apostles after the death and resurrection of Jesus and handed down to posterity. The Great Commission, about which we hear much, demands that the very Gospel of Jesus about the Kingdom be passed on to all nations till the end of the age and the return of Jesus.

Is all this complex? Does it make any sense that Christians would call themselves followers of Jesus and then bypass his Gospel preaching? Is it in any way safe or methodologically sound to skip over the repeated definitions of the Gospel as it came from the mouth of Jesus and rush to isolated verses in the letters of Paul?

But that is exactly what the approximately 50 websites I consulted on the Gospel have done. There is a faithful copying of each other — the same use of the same verses from Paul, but no reference to Jesus as the preacher of the saving Gospel.

It is plain common sense to realize that the words “the Gospel” without further explanation do not tell you what the Gospel is about. It is plain common sense that if you want an explanation of the content of the Gospel you look for the phrase “Gospel of...” The Bible is most generous with this phrase, and it occurs early on in the New Testament records so that we should not be able to miss it. But miss it we certainly have.

The Gospel is defined 18 times as the Gospel of (=about) the Kingdom of God. That is the first “ABC” fact of the Christian faith. Matthew never uses the noun Gospel without its qualifying explanation “of the Kingdom” (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14). Mark sets up his whole story with a summary, programmatic statement of the activity and career of Jesus. “The Kingdom of

God is at hand: Repent and believe the Gospel” (1:15). Luke records the words of Jesus indicating the secret of his heart: “I must preach the Gospel of the Kingdom to the other cities also; that is the reason why I was sent” (4:43). Jesus sent the twelve out to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom. Jesus sent out the 70 to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom (Luke 8:1; 9:2). Jesus described the Christian faith as the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom (Luke 16:16).

I trust that our readers will not find us unduly critical if we suggest that among believers today the phrase Gospel of the Kingdom has all but disappeared. Do you share our alarm? Write and tell us if you do. It can be a lonely business pointing out the obvious and the simple, but there seems to be a need for this basic task. We are encouraged by those of you who write and tell us that the Bible is coming alive for you in a new way now that you see what the Gospel is as Jesus preached it. ☩

It Pays to Read Carefully

Since we last wrote to you, we have been on the Internet in pursuit of information about what Christians think the Gospel is. The results are surprising, not to say bewildering and often confusing. Some 50 samples were tested. These were statements tackling the subject head-on: “What is the Gospel?”

Complexity was the order of the day in many cases. According to some “Gospel” is a sort of wax-nose word needing to be bent into different shapes to fit different contexts. So at any point in the course of the New Testament you are not quite sure what “gospel” means.

There is need to bring some order out of chaos on this most basic of all subjects. An agreement over the definition of the Gospel

could help churches take a giant step towards unity.

It seems to me incredible that those expert teachers and writers who have given us our New Testament documents were so inadequate that they left us in doubt about what the Gospel is. I am certain they took utmost trouble to convey to us an understanding of the New Testament’s most central term.

Several examples of the Gospel defined on the Internet plunged in with dogmatic certainty — but they began not with Jesus but Paul. It is beyond dispute, they argued, that Paul defined the Gospel once and for all in I Corinthians 15:1-3, where he limited the Gospel strictly to the facts about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

No attempt was made by these sources to explain how, if indeed the Gospel is about the death and resurrection of Jesus only, Jesus himself preached the Gospel for 25 chapters in Matthew, Mark and Luke *without so much as a word about his death and resurrection*.

Furthermore many ministries seemed unperturbed by the fact that if Paul really thought that the Gospel consisted only in facts about Jesus’ death and resurrection, he must have been in violation of the Great Commission by which Jesus commanded *everything* he taught to be taught worldwide as the Gospel (Matt. 28:19, 20).

So what about I Corinthians 15:1-3? Did Paul really say that Jesus’ death and resurrection comprised the whole Gospel? The answer is no. If we read carefully we hear Paul saying that he preached the death and resurrection of Jesus “among things of first importance” (v. 3). He did not say they formed the total Gospel. Henry Alford, in his celebrated commentary on the Greek New Testament, with an eagle eye for detail and precision, stated: “Paul declares to them the whole Gospel: not merely the Death and Resurrection of Christ which were important *parts of it*.”

Paul’s letters deal with special problems, and it is wise to go to other passages to find out

what Paul said about the content of his Gospel. In Corinth the issue at stake was the resurrection. And to that problem Paul directs his attention unambiguously. If, however, we listen carefully to Paul in Acts 20:25 we find that his own summary of Gospel ministry everywhere was this: “I went about preaching as Gospel *the Kingdom of God*” (note that the Greek *kerusso* — “herald” — implies the announcement of the Gospel).

So there it is: Paul and Jesus are in perfect harmony. Both were tireless proclaimers of the Gospel about the Kingdom of God (Acts 8:12).

The use of I Corinthians 15:1-3 as an out-and-out proof text for a watertight definition of the Gospel breaks down under careful scrutiny. There is one Gospel, and all the apostles followed the lead of Jesus in preaching it. When churches resolve to define the Gospel as Jesus and Paul did, a giant step towards unity will be achieved. But we have a long way to go. Tradition dies hard, and there is a pervasive lack of analytical study amongst churchgoers. “What we have always heard” seems to make sense, until someone comes and challenges the status quo in a closely-argued exegetical encounter. ✧

Plain Talk about Who God Is

Trying to read the Bible without understanding who the God of the Bible is is likely to be frustrating. Unfortunately so much pressure and dogmatism now surrounds the issue of who God is that Christians are unable to approach the text of Scripture with an open mind. A great measure of fear attends their studies, because they have been told what kind of a God they are to find in the Bible, or else... hellfire! This is a hopeless atmosphere for calm and reasoned investigation.

The matter of deciding who God is in the Bible is relatively simple, if we follow sound procedure.

And sound procedure demands that we start our investigation in the right place, the Hebrew Bible, the Bible which nurtured the Jews and Jesus and which Jesus categorically said he did not come to destroy (Matt. 5:17).

What God is presented in Jesus' Bible?

The creed of Israel, the cardinal tenet of all sound religion and the great hedge against idolatry and paganism, is of course the *Shema* — the “Hear O Israel” (Deut 6:4). This creed declares that the “Lord God is ONE LORD.” The oneness of God is here proposed in the simplest and clearest language.

To confirm this central truth the Hebrew Bible describes God with singular pronouns (I, Me, You, Him, My, Your, His) *thousands upon thousands of times!*

Anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of language knows, or ought to know, that singular pronouns denote a single Person. God therefore in the Bible is *One Person*.

Jesus affirmed the unitary, non-trinitarian, faith of Israel when he replied to the question put to him by a theologian as to the greatest of all the commandments.

Jesus replied that the “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One Lord” is the pinnacle of divine revelation. Only *that* God is to be loved with all our hearts and minds and strength (Mark 12:28ff.).

Paul echoed the teaching of Jesus on this point, with complete simplicity and clarity. Discussing the multiple gods of paganism, Paul contrasted the Christian belief: “To us [Christians] there is ONE God, the Father... And no one besides Him” (I Cor. 8:4-6). That of course is unitary monotheism, belief that God is a single Person.

The One God is defined, we note, not as three eternal Persons, but as the Father.

At once we are aware of a great difference between what traditionally appears in faith

statements and what Paul actually said: “There is one God, the Father.” That is simply the unitary monotheism of Paul’s and Jesus’ Jewish heritage. It is by definition also the Christian creed, because it is the biblical creed.

The stark simplicity of this creed may seem threatening to some, but it is the force of prejudice which makes it difficult to accept. There is no complexity about Paul’s creed. It is straightforward and beyond argument.

Many, however, find it unsatisfactory, and they rush to point out that Paul in I Corinthians 8:4-6 went on to say that Jesus was also “God.”

But did he? In fact, not at all. Paul did indeed go on to say that “there is one Lord Jesus Messiah” (1 Cor. 8:6). But it would be a fatal and confusing move to think that Paul, by calling Jesus *Lord*, was really calling him God! There is a crucial difference.

You see, there is a simple and overpoweringly influential text behind Paul’s language. It is Psalm 110:1, the very text which Jesus himself had produced when describing the relationship of himself the Messiah to the one God (Mark 12:35-37).

Psalm 110:1 is quoted or alluded to no less than 23 times in the New Testament. It appears in every section of the New Testament, and it would be a major mistake to ignore its importance.

Psalm 110:1 recognizes in good Jewish fashion that God (Yahweh) is *One* Individual and that One God speaks in a prophetic oracle to another individual, not Himself, who is “my lord,” the lord of David. “My lord” is told to sit at Yahweh’s right hand until he is given future victory over his enemies.

Now the second lord of Psalm 110:1, the Messiah, is definitely NOT God, but a superior *human* being. How do we know this for certain? Because of the careful choice of words in the original. “My lord” in the Hebrew inspired text is ADONI. In every one of the 195 times the word ADONI appears in the Bible, it *never* means God, but always a human (or occasionally

angelic) superior. ADONI is the word which tells us 195 times that the one named is *not* God, but man.

So when Paul said that next to the One God, the Father, there is “one Lord Jesus Messiah,” he meant the One (superior, human) lord as defined by Psalm 110:1. Paul has not confused Jesus with God.

Psalm 110:1 could well have used another word to describe the Messiah. There was a word ADONAI which meant God (in all of its 449 occurrences). But the spirit never confused God and the Son of God. God was Yahweh or Adonai and the Messiah was the human lord, ADONI.

There are two lords in the Bible, God and Jesus. But only the Father is the One God (“There is One God, the Father”). Jesus is the Lord Messiah, not the Lord God (Luke 2:11, etc.).

The creed of the Bible is the essence of simplicity: “There is One God, the Father, and one Lord Messiah, Jesus” (I Cor 8:4-6). ✧

The Tragic Loss of the Old Testament

The churches’ problems can be traced to a single major cause: the loss of the Hebrew Bible as the basis for sound faith. The Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) was the Bible on which Jesus and the Apostles were reared. The basis of the Gospel is found in the promises made to Abraham. “The Gospel was preached in advance to Abraham” (Gal. 3:8) and Jesus came “to fulfill the promises made to the patriarchs” (Rom. 15:8). Paul typically argued the Gospel “from the Law and the Prophets from dawn to dusk” (Acts 28:23).

By contrast today we are offered a superficial three-point “key to salvation” constructed on a few isolated verses from Romans. Our method is

the product of the quick-fix lifestyle. But the Bible and the great counsels of God will not yield to our over-simplified approach to the issue of conversion. Jesus did not preach a Gospel of the cross only, and neither did Paul. Paul was a disciple of Jesus and his object was to carry out the Great Commission which authorizes the continuation of the same Gospel as Jesus preached always, the Gospel of the Kingdom.

The Kingdom itself and the Gospel concerning it is rooted in the Hebrew Bible. The Kingdom is the Kingdom promised by the prophets. It has not yet arrived. The nations have not beaten their swords into plowshares. The nations are not flocking to Jerusalem to learn God's ways (Isa. 2:1-5; see also Dan. 2:44; 7:18, 22, 27; Obad. 21; Micah 4:7, 8).

What if we had been taught from childhood to embrace the vision of the prophets, the basis of the Christian gospel? How different things would be. Jeremiah preached the Gospel as he looked forward to this kind of a world: "I will give you pastors and teachers who will share my mind and who will feed you with knowledge and understanding...At that time they will call Jerusalem the throne of the Lord [the Kingdom of God] and there will be a multi-national gathering in Jerusalem on behalf of God's agenda. The nations will no longer behave according to the imagination of their evil heart. In those days and at that time the nation of Judah and the nation of Israel will return from the Northern Land to the land which I promised to their ancestors as their inheritance...You will call me Father and no longer turn away from Me" (see Jer 3:15-19).

The New Testament is a brilliant commentary on this vision of the "good time coming" on earth, the restoration of Israel to the land in peace and the conversion of nation-states as they come to recognize the Messiah who will then have returned to take up his position as world-governor on the restored throne of David.

"Listen! The days are coming, the Lord says, when I will produce for David a righteous

descendant [Branch] and a King will come to the throne and succeed as he executes justice and judgment in the land. In his days the Jews will be saved and Israel will live in security... They will live in their own land" (see Jer. 23:5-8). "In those days and at that time I [the Lord] will cause the Branch of righteousness [the Messiah] to appear, the Son of David, and he will execute judgment and sound government in the land" (Jer. 33:15-17).

These thrilling promises of world peace are the heart of the Good News as the New Testament presents it. Christians are invited to repent and believe in God's world Plan being executed through Jesus, the Son of God. At his farewell supper Jesus addressed the inner circle of disciples with these words — a summary of his whole Gospel mission. (They reflect perfectly Jesus' own mission statement recorded in Luke 4:43: "I must proclaim the Gospel about the Kingdom of God to the other cities also: That is why God commissioned me.") "You are the ones who have continued faithfully with me during all my trials and so I now covenant with you to give you a Kingdom, as my Father has covenanted with me to give me a Kingdom. You are going to eat and drink with me at my table in my [coming] Kingdom and you are going to be promoted to take your places on thrones to administer the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:28-30).

Jesus is inspired by the vision of the prophets of Israel just as Paul protested to his Jewish enemies that he was standing for the Hope of Israel, "believing everything written in the law and the prophets...the promise made by God to our patriarchs, the promise which our twelve tribes hope to attain" (Acts 24:14; 26:6, 7).

The Christian vision is no flimsy dream of "polishing rainbows" in heaven, no "pie in the sky." Jesus did not believe in a realm of disembodied spirits enjoying a post-mortem residence in some super-celestial region. There is at present no burning hell or purgatory. And none of the faithful has yet gone to be

consciously “with the Lord.” Coming face to face with Jesus can happen only via the future resurrection (I Thess. 4:13-17).

The Christian Gospel promises its adherents a place in the New World of peace and harmony to be established on the earth renewed by Jesus at his coming. This is the Gospel about the Kingdom, the Kingdom destined to come from heaven at the Parousia (Second Coming) of the Messiah.

How strange and — dare we add — sinister that gospel tracts have dropped the word Kingdom from the phrase “Kingdom of Heaven,” thus robbing the Gospel of its principal element, the key to the heart and mind of Jesus. ✧

Responses

“Thank you for the books recently received from your ministry concerning the Gospel of the Kingdom. I now have a fresh new perspective of the Gospel of the Kingdom and learned things I really needed to learn. It amazes me how little is really taught on this subject of absolute vital importance. The book on what happens after death was another eye opener...May many, many more eyes be opened to the truth concerning the Gospel of the Kingdom through the work God has called you into.”

— *Michigan*

“I am listening to your program with the greatest interest and learning to read the Bible in a new way.”

— *Germany*

“I am in a state of shock. I have been a Christian for twenty years. Yet I never heard these basic teachings which I now see so clearly in the words of Jesus.”

— *New Jersey*

An Invitation

Atlanta Bible College will host its eighth annual Theological Conference at Atlanta Bible College, Morrow, Georgia, from 2:00 p.m. on Friday, April 30th, 1999 until 12:00 noon, Sunday, May 2nd.

We are excited to welcome this year two speakers from overseas. Werner Bartl of Austria will address us on his spiritual journey from unbeliever to evangelical, charismatic leader, and subsequent doctrinal reevaluation. Ferenc Jeszenszky will visit us from Hungary where he is a retired professor of science and has translated Abrahamic materials into Hungarian.

Those wanting to know more about the history and theology of Atlanta Bible College will find the weekend an excellent opportunity also for fellowship with truth-seeking believers desiring to recover the faith of first-century Christians. If you would like a time-slot (about 20 minutes) to tell us about your own journey of faith, we would love to hear from you.

The cost of the conference is \$25 before April 7th, and \$35 after. To register please send a check, along with your name, address, and phone number, to Atlanta Bible College, 5823 Trammell Rd, Morrow, GA 30260.

We will have a block reservation of rooms at the Red Roof Inn, 1348 South Lake Plaza Drive, 1-75 and SR 54, exit 76, Morrow, GA 30260 (770-968-1483). Note that until April 16 these rooms will be available at per night prices of 1) Single, \$35. 2) One king-size bed, \$42.99. 3) Two king-sized beds, \$46.99. These rooms may be booked by calling (800) 843-7663 and mentioning that you are with ABC Theological Conference. You should quote the block-booking number: **B 114000329**.

If you have any questions, please contact us here at Atlanta Bible College (800-347-4261).

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