

Focus on the Kingdom

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Anthony Buzzard, editor

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A Challenge to Students of the Bible

The following quotations from leading authorities on the Bible should cause us to “examine all things carefully.” Popular majority opinion is not necessarily correct. Many professional scholars oppose it: May we respectfully request of our readers that they pay careful attention to the issues raised below. “Gut reactions” and “knee-jerk responses” should be avoided!

“It may be said at once that there is no trace of a doctrine of a Trinity in the Gospel of John.”¹

“The notion of the Holy Spirit as a third divine personality is one of the most disastrous importations into the Holy Scriptures.”²

“There is no trace of the idea of ‘three divine persons in one’ in the New Testament...No Apostle would have dreamt of thinking that there are three divine persons...The mystery of the Trinity proclaimed by the Church did not spring from biblical doctrine.”³

“The Trinitarians edited their notorious Trinitarian text into the first Epistle of John [I John 5:7, see the KJV and compare it with all modern versions].”⁴

¹ E.F. Scott, D.D., *The Fourth Gospel*, p. 341.

² W. Beyschlag, *N.T. Theology*, Vol. II, p. 279.

³ Emil Brunner, *Christian Doctrine of God, Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, p. 226.

⁴ Pinchas Lapide and Jürgen Moltmann, *Jewish*

“Arguments for the Trinitarian dogma do not exist in the Bible as they were later preserved in Orthodoxy.”⁵

“Paul would have had no knowledge of a dogmatic Trinity, since that came into the world only centuries after his death.”⁶

“The Jew Jesus knew of a Trinity in a dogmatic sense just as little as the Jew Paul.”⁷

“The image of God in the primitive Church was unitary [= God is one Person, not three].”⁸

“During the bloody intra-Christian religious wars of the fourth and fifth centuries, thousands upon thousands of Christians slaughtered other Christians for the sake of the Trinity.”⁹

“Many Christians are genuinely concerned and many Jews justifiably frustrated trying to find in the Trinity the pure faith in One God.”¹⁰ (Muslims often reject the Christian faith outright because of the strange doctrine that God is three in One.)

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Monotheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine, p. 40.

⁵ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, p. 287.

⁶ Pinchas Lapide and Jürgen Moltmann, *Jewish Monotheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine*, pp. 38, 39, 40.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hans Kung, “Antwort an Meine Kritiker,”

“The doctrine which follows from the identification of Jesus with a pre-existent divine being is ultimately incompatible with the unity of God.”¹¹

“Most Christians probably escape from the dry abstractions of Augustinian orthodoxy by reinterpreting it tritheistically. In the last resort [this] implies the existence of three divine centres of consciousness — in other words, three Gods.”¹²

“The Church has not usually in practice (whatever it may have claimed to be doing in theory) based its doctrine about Christ exclusively on the witness of the New Testament. Doctrine about Christ has never in practice been derived simply by way of logical inference from the statements of Scripture.”¹³

“[If] the eternal Son assumes a timeless human nature, or makes it timeless by making it his own, it is a human nature which has nothing essential to do with geographical circumstance; it corresponds to nothing in the actual concrete world; Jesus Christ has not after all ‘come in the flesh.’”¹⁴

“The clear evidence of the Gospel of John [is that] Jesus refuses the claim to be God...Jesus vigorously denied the blasphemy of being God or His substitute.”¹⁵

“Paul nowhere definitely equates Jesus with God.”¹⁶

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 22nd May, 1976.

¹¹ Geoffrey Lampe, *God As Spirit*, The Bampton Lectures, 1976, p. 141.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹³ Maurice Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, The Hulsean lectures, 1973, pp. 54, 55.

¹⁴ Geoffrey Lampe, *God As Spirit*, p. 144.

¹⁵ J.A.T. Robinson, *Twelve More New Testament Studies*, pp. 175, 176.

¹⁶ W.R. Matthews, D.D., *The Problem of Christ in the Twentieth Century*, The Maurice Lectures, 1949, p. 22.

“Jesus never calls Himself God, but ever claims to be the Son of God.”¹⁷

“Jesus is not God but God’s representative, and, as such, so completely and totally acts on His behalf that he stands in God’s stead before the world...The Gospel of John clearly states that God and Jesus are not to be understood as identical persons, as in 14:28, ‘the Father is greater than I.’”¹⁸

“The Gospel of John, like other early Christian witnesses, thinks of Jesus as legal agent, and apostle of God, who was physically and personally a human being (“low Christology”), but legally he was equal to God (“high Christology”). Jesus held a status that was legally equal to God (John 10:33), but, on the other hand, the Father (as the principal) was greater (John 14:28) than the Son, who was the agent.”¹⁹

“It would be ridiculous to imagine that Jesus is God, *tout simple*. The New Testament writers do not claim this for him; they know he is very much one of us.”²⁰ (This author writes as a Trinitarian, but still recognizes that the statement “Jesus is God” without further qualification is misleading.)

“Should we then say that Jesus was confessed as God from earliest days in Hellenistic Christianity? That would be to claim too much. (1) The emergence of a confession of Jesus in terms of divinity was largely facilitated by the extensive use of Ps. 110:1 from very early on (most clearly in Mark 12:36; Acts 2:34ff.; I Cor.

¹⁷ *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*, Extra Vol., p. 312.

¹⁸ Jacob Jervell, *Jesus in the Gospel of John*, 1984, p. 21.

¹⁹ G.W. Buchanan, *Biblical and Theological Insights Based on Ancient and Modern Civil Law*, to be published, pp. 128, 129.

²⁰ *The Truth of God Incarnate*, ed. Michael Green, p. 23.

15:25; Heb. 1:13): “the Lord says to my lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’” Its importance lies in the double use of ‘lord.’ The one is clearly Yahweh, but who is the other? Clearly not Yahweh, but an exalted being whom the psalmist calls ‘lord.’ (2) Paul calls Jesus ‘lord,’ but he seems to have marked reservations about calling Jesus ‘God.’ Rom. 9:5 is the only real candidate within Paul’s letters (but even there the text is unclear). Similarly he refrains from praying to Jesus. He prays to God through Christ...At the same time Paul affirms Jesus is ‘Lord’ he also affirms ‘God is One,’ ‘There is only one God’ (Deut. 6:4). Hence also Rom. 3:30, Gal. 3:20, I Tim. 2:5 (cp. James 2:19)...The point for us to note is that Paul can hail Jesus as Lord not in order to identify him with God, but rather, if anything, to distinguish him from the One God (cp. particularly I Cor. 15:24-28).”²¹

The information quoted above gives the substance of statements made by leading theologians. The inquiring reader will want to know how it is that the dogma of the Trinity has been declared to be the hallmark of true Christianity, while recognized biblical scholars deny that any such dogma is found in the writings of leading, biblical Christians. Why not allow yourself to be challenged by these extraordinary facts?

Millions of churchgoers accept without question what they are taught about God. It is perilous, however, to follow majority opinion blindly, especially when distinguished experts declare them to be untrue. The only safe path is to examine the Bible for yourself.

Does the Bible ever speak of a Godhead consisting of three Persons? Traditional Christianity has been based on the dogma of the Trinity for some 1600 years. Much evidence is available to show that the Trinitarian dogma was forced on believers and that it has no biblical basis — that it actually negates the heart of the

Bible’s teaching that there is One God who is One Person, the Father (I Cor. 8:6; John 17:3; 5:44; I Tim. 2:5; Eph. 4:4-6).

Some say that since Jesus is “worshipped” he must be God. This argument is entirely fallacious. The word “worship” in the Old Testament and New Testament is used in different senses. (1) To denote religious service to the One God. (2) To denote homage paid to superior personages including, supremely, the Messiah. In I Chronicles 29:20 David the King is “worshipped” along with God (see KJV). In Revelation 3:9 the Christians are going to be “worshipped” (see again the KJV). The same word is used here as is used also for the worship of the One God, the Father. Jesus is worshipped in the Bible as the Messiah, not as the One God.

The identity of God and Jesus are critically important issues for all students of Christianity. Effective worship must be based on Truth (John 4:24). Nothing is more essential than a biblical understanding of the One God and His relationship to His Son, the Messiah Jesus. ✞

Seeing God in Jesus

Jesus is the fullest possible expression of God in a human being

The unique beauty of the Christian faith is that God is revealed in Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus is not *just* a man, if by that you mean he is merely an outstanding man. Jesus is unique. He is the head of the New Creation, the counterpart to Adam. Jesus did not commit sin, yet he was tempted as all human beings are (Heb. 4:15). Jesus was created supernaturally by the action of God’s spirit — His creative energy — working in the Virgin Mary. Jesus was “pre-planned,” “pre-appointed.” This is the belief of Peter (I Pet. 1:20), a leading spokesman for the Christian faith and one who was personally trained by Jesus and gave his life for the faith. Peter and the Apostles taught that Jesus came into existence in Mary’s womb and was thus

²¹ *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, James Dunn, p. 53.

begotten (=brought into existence) by the Father. All sons are by definition the products of their Father. Jesus is no exception. The word “Son” and the word “begotten” are completely meaningless if one thinks that Jesus is “coequal and coeternal with his Father.” In an attempt to cover up their confusion, traditional systems of belief have claimed that Jesus was “eternally begotten.” But such language has no recognizable meaning. It is much like speaking of “square circles.” To be begotten means that you have a beginning. But if you exist eternally you have no beginning. Jesus the Son of God was begotten. Therefore the Son had a beginning. His beginning was his conception miraculously brought about by God.

Only the Father is the One God. “There is One God, the Father” (I Cor. 8:4-6). Jesus called God, His Father “the only one who is truly God” (John 17:3; 5:44). God is described by singular personal pronouns (singular pronouns define a person as one and not more) over 11,000 times. Jesus is the Lord Messiah, the *adoni* (my lord) of Psalm 110:1. This Psalm is the great key to understanding, and it expressly says that Jesus is not the Lord God (*adonai*) but *adoni* the supreme human lord (*adoni* in all of its 195 occurrences never refers to God).

Some modern translations bend the text of the original Greek to imply that Jesus was alive before he was born. Here is an example. Open the NIV translation at John 16:28. You will read there that Jesus intended to go *back* to the Father. But check other versions (KJV or NASV, or the original Greek). There is nothing in the text about going *back*. Jesus was going to the Father, not going *back*. In John 20:17 Jesus spoke of ascending to the Father (NASV). But the NIV changes the sense entirely by making Jesus say “I am *returning* to the Father.” Jesus’ words in the original merely affirm that he was going to ascend to the Father, not *return* to the Father.

Such mistranslations should alert readers of

the Bible that systems of belief are sometimes inserted into the Bible instead of being found there. Translation can easily become a subtle form of interpretation which justifies a particular belief system.

The best way to study the Bible is to ask: What is the broad view of a given subject across the pages of the whole Bible? It is particularly important to search the Old Testament for its view of who God is and who the Messiah is. Does the Hebrew Bible have anything to say about the Son of God being alive before his birth? The answer is positively “no.” The Hebrew prophets foresee the coming of the Son who *in the future* (future to the time of the prophecy) will come on to the scene of history. Thus, in the classic prophecy of the future appearance of the Son of God who is also the Son of David, God announces to David a thousand years before the birth of the Messiah “I *will be* his Father and he *will be* my Son” (2 Sam. 7:14). We note that God said nothing at all about that Son *already existing* with Him in heaven.

Jesus is God’s word — God’s mind and thought — manifested in and through a perfect human being.

The Son of God is to be the unique agent of God who will arise from the line of David and, because of the miraculous creative conception effected by God, will be designated Son of God. The precious instruction given us by the angel Gabriel needs to be repeated constantly. It is “for that reason” — the action of God in Mary — that the Son to be begotten (brought into existence) will be the Son of God (Luke 1:35). To maintain that “Son of God” means you are actually God Himself makes a nonsense of this simple, elementary teaching of the Bible. In a fine statement of the facts, a leading theologian in our time says: “To be called ‘Son of God’ in the Bible means that you are *not God*.” (This should be self-evident, but the pressure of tradition and ecclesiastical councils threatening anathemas to all who might question their dogmas, makes it very difficult for Bible readers to enter the Jewish world of the Bible.) This

world of Jesus and the New Testament is delightfully free of the complicated and mysterious doctrines about God devised some 400 years after Bible times. Our readers should learn to distinguish how much of what they have learned in church really comes from the Bible and how much has been accepted as biblical without careful examination.

The climax of God's dealings with man arrived when God spoke "at the end of those days" in a Son (Heb. 1:1, 2). God, this letter to the Hebrews says, spoke in many different ways to the "fathers" but gave his final Message (word) in a Son. That Son, says the same author, is superior to angels, to Moses, to Joshua and to Levi. (If the author really believed that Jesus was God it is very strange that he labors to show that he is superior to God's prominent spokesmen in Old Testament times. All he needed to do was say "Jesus is God." But he never said this, nor did any New Testament writer.)

When challenged by hostile Jewish religious authorities that he was making a claim to be "equal with God," Jesus gave a very interesting answer to set the record straight. He denied that he "was God." He compared himself to the judges of Israel whom God had called "Gods." Obviously this use of the word "God" for human judges meant that they represented the One God, not that they were actually "God." If those important human Israelite agents of God were "God," then, Jesus argued, he was entitled to be called "Son of God." In no way did Jesus claim equality with God. His highest claim was to be "Son of God." (This whole episode should be carefully studied in John 10:34-36.) Many contemporary writers simply leave out the words of Jesus when he responded to the charge that he was making himself equal with God. Some jump to the conclusion that Jesus' enemies precisely understood what Jesus was saying. That is not so. Jesus had to clarify his claims and he did it by comparing himself to the human judges of Israel. His position was as the supreme revealer of God's Plan. Jesus' teaching gives us insight into what God is doing and what He expects of us.

Jesus is God's word — God's mind and thought — manifested in and through a perfect human being. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" means that God was carrying out His salvation purpose by using Jesus as His final missionary agent to rescue the world from the grip of Satan. Thomas was slow to realize Jesus' uniqueness and Jesus chided him with these words: "Have I been so long with you and you do not recognize that if you have seen me you have seen God?" (John 14:5-11; 12:45). The God whom Thomas finally recognized in Jesus was the God of Jesus also. Jesus is like a perfectly clear window giving us a view of God. Jesus is as much God as can be contained and revealed in a human person.

Various passages in some Bible translations force the original to say what it does not say. Here are two examples. I Timothy 3:16 states that "God was manifested in the flesh..." Modern versions, following a better manuscript reading, read "He who was manifested in the flesh..." I John 5:7 inserts a statement which reflects times long after the completion of the writing of the Bible. This verse is found in the KJV but has been rightly dropped from all modern translations. It is universally known to be a forgery and should never be used as the basis of a doctrinal argument. It appears in no Greek manuscript until the 15th century!

The Bible comes alive for its readers in a new way when we recognize the Jewishness of Jesus and the original "faith once and for all delivered to the people of God" (Jude 3). Jesus subscribed wholeheartedly to the cardinal tenet of Judaism found in Deuteronomy 6:5: God is One Lord and there is none beside Him. This we call unitary monotheism. This is the creed of Jesus and the Bible writers. As a leading scholar at Cambridge recently wrote, "John is as undeviating a witness as any in the NT to the fundamental tenet of Judaism, of unitary monotheism (Rom. 3:30; Jas. 2:19; John 5:44; 17:3)" (J.A.T. Robinson, *12 More NT Studies*, p. 175). In other words, John and Jesus believed that God was one Person, not three. This creed

has a simple beauty, and it is likely to win the attention of Jews today and of course Moslems. The Church has a long history of erecting an unnecessary barrier between itself and the Jewish and Islamic communities by proposing the very strange and inexplicable idea that God is mysteriously three and yet one. Jews and Moslems will instinctively reject such a notion. Jews will deny — and rightly — that any idea of a three-Person God is found in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament, the Bible which nurtured Jesus). And Moslems know that their Koran, which recognizes Jesus as at least a prophet (and virginally conceived) will fight hard against the traditional view of God as three in one. What a marvelous new opportunity for evangelism! The God of Jesus is One Lord. Jews know that God is One and so do Moslems. ✧

The Jewish Roots of Christianity

Some today suppose that there is a special virtue attached to being Jewish in their approach to the Christian faith. There is a danger here. There is a biblical Jewishness which the New Testament demands of all believers. That Jewishness means recognizing that Jesus is the Messiah — a Jewish Old Testament word for the expected King of Israel promised in the covenants made with Abraham and David. Biblical concern for Jewish roots means also recognizing that the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, contains the basis of New Testament faith. Paul said that the Gospel had been preached to Abraham (Gal. 3:8). He found the Gospel of God in the writings of the prophets of Israel (Rom. 1:1, 2). Paul knew that Jesus had come to reaffirm the promises made to the Old Testament fathers (Rom 15:8): “Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the Truth of God [the Gospel] to confirm the promises made to the fathers.” All these concerns fully justify a “Jewish” approach to the New Testament. Christians should be following the Jew Jesus.

However, a warning is in order. It is all too easy to be carried away with the concept of “Jewish roots” and lose sight of the fact that Paul, as the agent of Jesus, taught a freedom from the Law of Moses. Christianity is not just a “repeat” of Judaism. Paul, for example, considers circumcision in the flesh to have no value for the Christian. In Romans 14:14, 20 Paul states categorically that “there is nothing unclean in itself,” and “all things indeed are clean.” He uses here the exact words found in the Old Testament passages which demand a careful distinction between “clean” and “unclean” foods.

Mark 7:19 notes that Jesus revised the code forbidding certain foods under the Law. Jesus taught in Matthew 19:8 that Moses had allowed certain divorce practices in Israel which were not God’s absolute ideal, but which He had allowed because of their hardness of heart. Jesus then went on to revise the Law of Moses in this matter of divorce. He appealed to an earlier and more absolute standard for marriage — a standard which God had instituted in Genesis at the beginning (Matt. 19:8, 9). Jesus allowed only one exception in the right to divorce and remarriage: fornication, i.e. unrepented breaking of the marriage bond by sexual infidelity.

Christianity therefore is not just a continuation of Judaism with the Messiah as its leader. The Gospel is rooted in the Old Testament, certainly. But the practice of the faith is revised under the terms of the New Covenant. Circumcision in the flesh falls away. The Ten Commandments and thus the covenant made with Moses and Israel are actually (and this point is seldom realized by Christians today) compared to bondage and likened to the offspring of Hagar. Hagar was the slave-girl. Sarah is the model of freedom and her children are the true Christians who are products **not of the Sinai covenant** but born of the spirit of the Promise. A careful reading of Galatians 4:21-31 is essential for a good grasp of this newness of the New Covenant. It is a dramatic and eye-opening revelation of what it means to be free in Christ.

Note now the practical effects of this teaching. God spoke to the New Testament Christians in a variety of languages at Pentecost. There is absolutely no religious value in using only a Hebrew name for Jesus (Jeshua). If you are amongst Hebrew speakers Jeshua is perfectly reasonable but the Hebrew name carries no “magic” quality or sanctity. The inspired Apostles wrote in Greek, and they used the Greek word for the Lord (*kurios*) and the Greek form of the name Jesus. It is pointless and divisive to *insist* (sometimes as a matter of salvation!) on a special pronunciation of the Divine Name YHVH. The New Testament writers refer to God as “Lord” (again, *kurios*). It is bizarre to write G-d rather than “God” for fear of contamination. The sound of the word is unimportant. Christians should be most careful not to clothe the faith in strange practices which invite ridicule and obscure the *real* truth of Christianity.

There is a grave danger of putting up a barrier between yourself and the world you hope to win for Jesus by insisting on certain Jewish, Old Testament practices which were shadows of the New Covenant. I have in mind obligatory Sabbath and Holy Day observance or keeping the New Moons. These collectively are “a shadow of things to come” (Col. 2:17). Christ has replaced them. The New Testament Christians did not keep the Passover once a year. The old Passover became an ongoing (whenever the church met) celebration of the Lord’s Supper (see I Cor. 11:17ff.). John’s Gospel refers to the Old Testament festivals as “feasts of the Jews.” How very improbable, then, that John thought of the very same festivals as *Christian* celebrations. “Let us therefore keep the feast” (I Cor. 5:8) means “Let us be permanently celebrating the Feast,” with the unleavened bread of sincerity and Truth. A good commentary will point to the meaning of the continuous sense of the present tense Greek verb, “Let us be celebrating.”

The shadow of the Law has passed away and the substance found in Christ has taken its place. Thus no animal sacrifices, the heart of Jewish

ritual, are necessary for the Christian.

So the Jewish roots of our faith are fine as long as we do not fall back under the Law of Moses. This is a serious issue. Those who are trying to keep the Law of Moses as Christians risk being cut off entirely from the Messiah (Gal. 4:30; 5:4). The covenants cannot be mixed. Biblical Christianity is a new faith, though it is rooted in the promises made to Abraham which pre-dated the arrangements made with Moses (see the whole Book of Galatians and request our booklet “The Law, the Sabbath and New Testament Christianity”). ☩

Comments

“I thank God for your ‘Fellowship’ and your many publications which are touching the lives of many worldwide, mine included. I read your letter of encouragement and the various articles with my wife. She was most happy, too. I am completing the students work-book for *The Coming Kingdom of the Messiah*.” — *Zambia*

“Your broadcast every morning on shortwave has been a source of spiritual blessing, as iron sharpens iron. It is my prayer that God will continue to lubricate your spiritual elbows as you work in the Vineyard of the Lord.” — *Nigeria*

“I hear your program in Spokane, WA on KSPO...I was especially thrilled to hear you say that our ancestors are asleep and not in heaven. Even Jesus said that David was still asleep.” — *Washington*

At our recent Theological Conference at Atlanta Bible College a number of visitors told fascinating stories of their search for biblical truth and their journey of faith. Tapes (either audio or video) are available to our readers. Audio \$4 and video \$8. These will be sent free to those for whom payment may be impossible.

“The Christian hope for life beyond death is not based on the belief that part of man survives death. All men, through their descent from Adam, are naturally mortal. Immortality is the gift of God, which will be attained through the resurrection of the whole person” (*New Bible Dictionary*).