

Focus on the Kingdom

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Anthony Buzzard, editor

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Atlanta Bible College's annual Theological Conference will be held February 7-9, 2003. Details were announced in our December *Focus* (now at our website www.restorationfellowship.org). Accommodation is available at the Hampton Inn, Morrow, GA. The block rate of \$69 per night (1-4 persons) may be reserved by calling 770-968-8990 by **January 30** and mentioning Atlanta Bible College. The rate includes continental breakfast and shuttle service from Atlanta airport. Please arrange airport shuttle directly with the hotel. Shuttle from Hampton Inn to ABC will be provided. The conference will begin Friday, Feb. 7 at 9 a.m. and end Sunday with lunch. Cost of the conference is \$59 **before January 15th**, \$69 after. This price includes 3 lunches. To register, please call 800-347-4261.

“We Have a Law” A Perspective on the Death of Jesus

by Brian K. Wright

What did Jesus say or do that so upset the Jews that they hauled him before Pilate and demanded his death? The narrative of the trial of Jesus holds some interesting clues.

The Trial of Jesus (John 18:29-19:15)

“What accusation do you bring against this man?” Pilate asked Jesus’ accusers. “If this man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered him to you” came the vague reply. Now I am not trying to justify the actions of Pilate but put yourself in his sandals for a moment. What would you make of such an accusation? It sounds very much like an accusation with no merit.

“Take him yourselves, and judge him according to your law.” I can picture Pilate rising from his chair, turning his back to the Jews and striding majestically toward the nearest exit. What a waste of my time, he probably thought to himself.

“We are not permitted to put anyone to death” came the chilling reply. Pilate must have frozen in his

tracks upon hearing these words. Did they say death? Maybe this was more serious than he initially thought.

Pilate called for Jesus to testify before him. After questioning him about whether or not he was a king, Pilate determined that Jesus presented no threat. He went out to the Jews and said “I find no guilt in him.” With that he offered to release Jesus to them. Pilate must have hoped that the Jews would be satisfied that he had taken their complaint seriously.

“Not this man, but Barrabas!” they cried out. By that time Pilate must have been frustrated with the mob. Why didn’t they accept his course of action? Were they questioning his judgment? With exasperation over a growing crisis not of his own making, Pilate ordered Jesus to be flogged. The man is probably guilty of some offense, he may have reasoned.

“Behold, I am bringing him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in him.” Surely the Jews would be satisfied with the punishment meted out to this man who had so incensed them.

“Crucify him, crucify him,” they shouted angrily. Suddenly filled with fear, Pilate realized that he was in danger of losing control. The crowd was seething with anger. Under stress, Pilate lost his composure. “Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no fault in him!” he shouted. He may have reasoned that since the Jews had already informed him that they couldn’t put anyone to death, they wouldn’t actually kill Jesus. Perhaps the Jews might offer an alternative.

“We have a law, and by that law he ought to die because he made himself out to be the Son of God!” they shouted. This made Pilate even more afraid. Once more, he took Jesus in for questioning.

Pilate tried one last time to release Jesus but the Jews would have none of it. “If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar.” Now it was clear to Pilate. For the sake of political self-preservation, he would have to sacrifice the life of an innocent man.

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It was time to sear his conscience and give the people what they wanted. Taking his place in the judgment seat for the final act of this terrible drama, Pilate brought Jesus before them and said, "Behold, your king." Perhaps he could convince the Jews that upon further questioning he had been able to find fault with Jesus after all.

"Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" they shouted, apparently aware that they were about to get what they had requested.

"Shall I crucify your king?" he must have said in a mocking tone of voice. "We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests replied. Ah, loyalty from the mob! His career salvaged, Pilate ordered the troublemaker put to death. His popularity with the crowd must have soared that awful day. And the rest, as they say, is history.

What was this law the Jews kept referring to? It must be related to the accusation that Jesus made himself out to be the Son of God.

Jesus the King

What does the term "Son of God" mean? To people who believe in the doctrine of the Trinity it means that Jesus was claiming to be Almighty God. They might point us to the accusation of the Jews as proof: "For a good work we do not stone you, but for blasphemy; and because you, being a man, make yourself out to be God" (John 10:33).

Can such an explanation be correct? Only if we fail to listen to Jesus' own response to this accusation! Jesus said, "Has it not been written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'? If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the *Son of God*'?" (John 10:34-36).

Jesus quoted Psalm 82:6 in his defense. Psalm 82 was written to rebuke the unjust decisions of the judges and rulers of Israel. The New International Version Study Bible (10th Anniversary Edition) contains this illuminating note: "In the language of the OT — and in accordance with the conceptual world of the ancient Near East — rulers and judges, as deputies of the Heavenly King, could be given the honorific title 'god' or be called 'son of God.'"

Professor Craig L. Blomberg adds further confirmation: "In Psalm 82:6, the psalmist refers to the corrupt evil judges of his day (or perhaps to Israel at the time of the giving of the Law) as 'gods.' If the authoritative Scriptures can call mere mortals 'gods,'

in this limited sense of referring to earthly leaders, Jesus argues, then how much more is it not acceptable for him to apply the term to himself, who is God's unique agent on earth?"¹

Jesus did not deny that he said he was the Son of God. However, far from claiming to be God himself, Jesus was actually announcing himself to be the judge and ruler of Israel!

With this understanding, the line of questioning Pilate pursued with Jesus, the denial of the Jews that Jesus was their king and their subsequent pledge of allegiance to Caesar are quite understandable. Pilate feared the Jews and the possibility that Jesus was plotting a rebellion. The Jews, particularly the chief priests, did not believe Jesus' claim to be their king.

Jesus the Prophet

The people believed that Jesus was a prophet. For example, when he made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, Matthew records, "And the crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee'" (Matt. 21:11).

Jesus himself believed that he was a prophet. In an early visit to Jerusalem he said, "Nevertheless I must journey on today and tomorrow and the next day; for it cannot be that a prophet would perish outside of Jerusalem" (Luke 13:33).

But not all believed. Luke also records the reaction of a Pharisee to the actions of a woman who anointed Jesus with perfume: "If this man were a prophet he would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching him, that she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39b). Once again we encounter disbelief, probably widespread, of the claim made by Jesus.

But what possible bearing could this claim of Jesus to be a prophet have on our question about the law? Though there was no explicit mention of it in the trial before Pilate, I intend to show that it has a direct bearing on our understanding of the attitude of the Jews and their appeal for the death penalty in the case of Jesus.

Bring in Moses

The Jews appealed to Pilate that they had a law which called for the death penalty. The law they referred to would have been something written by Moses. The Jews called upon the written words of Moses to prosecute Jesus.

¹ *Jesus and the Gospels*, Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, p. 299.

It is interesting that Philip also appealed to the writing of Moses when he told Nathanael, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote — Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (John 1:45).

Jesus himself said to the Jews, “Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” (John 5:45-47). What did Moses write about Jesus?

A Prophet Like Me

Moses wrote about a great prophet that God would one day raise up. “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him” (Deut. 18:15). That this Scripture was applied to Jesus may be clearly seen in the testimony of Peter in his second sermon after Pentecost (Acts 3:22) and the testimony of Stephen just before he was martyred (Acts 7:37).

I Will Put My Words in His Mouth

Moses goes on to write, “I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him” (Deut. 18:18).

That prophet certainly was not to be God Himself. The apostolic application of Moses’ prediction to Jesus absolutely rules out any doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus is the ultimate prophet, a member of the House of Israel, not God!

In opposition to the application of Scripture made by Peter and Stephen, Aryeh Kaplan expresses the Jewish view: “There is no evidence that the original passage speaks of the Messiah at all. The verse merely states that the future prophets of Israel in general would share Moses’ saintly qualities.”² The positions of these camps are irreconcilable. Christians accept the teaching of the Apostles (Acts 3:22; 7:37).

Bring in Jesus

Jesus made few comments during the trial, but by examining just a few of the statements made during his ministry, we will notice a beautiful harmony with the writing of Moses. It is clear from his words that he

² *The Real Messiah? A Jewish Response to Missionaries*, New York: National Conference of Synagogue Youth/Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, 1985, p. 66.

was acting not on his own accord but as the representative of God.

“My teaching is not mine, but His who sent me” (John 7:16).

“Jesus answered them, ‘I told you and you do not believe; the works [miracles and teaching] that I do in my Father’s name, these testify of me’” (John 10:25).

“And Jesus cried out and said, ‘He who believes in me, does not believe in me but in Him who sent me’” (John 12:44).

“For I did not speak on my own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent me has given me a commandment as to what to say and what to speak” (John 12:49).

“I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told me” (John 12:50).

“The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own initiative, but the Father abiding in me does His works” (John 14:10b).

“He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine, but the Father’s who sent me” (John 14:24).

All this is in perfect harmony with the portrait of the Messiah provided by Moses (Deut. 18:15-18).

Bring in the Voice from Heaven

In the vision of the transfiguration of Jesus, we encounter the powerful testimony of the Father: “Then a voice came out of the cloud saying, ‘This is My son, My chosen one; **listen to him!**’” (Luke 9:35). All other testimony pales in comparison to the testimony of Jesus’ Father.

Bring in Moses Again

Moses had also written, “It will come about that whoever will not listen to My [God’s] words which he [the prophet] shall speak in My [God’s] name, I [God] Myself will require it of him” (Deut. 18:19). God promises a severe penalty for anyone who will not listen to the prophet He will raise up. That the prophet is God’s Son, Jesus, is evident from the Scriptures.

We Have a Law

That the Jews did not listen to Jesus, that is, did not believe the words he spoke, has been clearly demonstrated by their words and actions. This failure to listen (believe) is the key that leads us to the writing of Moses, the particular law they appealed to. And what was this law?

Moses wrote, “But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My [God’s] name which I

have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, **that prophet shall die**" (Deut. 18:20).

Continuing Ramifications

The Jews did not believe the words of Jesus. They therefore viewed him then, and still view him now, as a false prophet. Aryeh Kaplan writes, "The Bible (Deuteronomy 18:22) says that one of the signs of a true prophet is when his prophecy comes true exactly. There is no evidence that Jesus fulfilled this condition."³

This is of course tragic. In discussing the current state of the Jews, Paul teaches that they have been cut off for their unbelief, but they may be grafted back in if they do not continue in their unbelief (Rom. 11: 20, 23).

There is also an important message here for those who profess to believe in Jesus. "Quite right, they [the Jews] were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith [in the gospel message proclaimed by Jesus]. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you either. Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell [because of their unbelief], severity, but to you, God's kindness; *if* you continue in his kindness [through belief in the words of His Son]; otherwise you also will be cut off" (Rom. 11:20-22). (No doctrine of "once saved, always saved" here!)

Jesus warned, "He who rejects me and does not receive my sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day" (John 12:48). As we have seen, the word Jesus spoke was the Gospel message of the Kingdom that God commissioned him to proclaim. Those who do not believe the message will be judged and punished for their unbelief.

It is therefore absolutely essential that we believe the message delivered by the messenger. And what was the message that Jesus proclaimed? "Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and **proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom**" (Matt. 4:23).

The Jews rejected the gospel Jesus preached and were cut off because of their unbelief (Acts 3:22, 23). Many today, both Jews and Gentiles, are misled because they have not believed the gospel of the kingdom. To them we say, hear these words of Jesus the Messiah: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel"

³ *The Real Messiah?* p. 66.

(Mark 1:15). That is Jesus' first command and salvation is conditional on obedience to the Messiah (Heb. 5:9). ✧

Jesus and the Elixir of Life Part 2

Back to the Gospel of the Kingdom

This is the saving Message which Jesus and Paul always offered to the public.⁴ Jesus, having preached the Gospel of the Kingdom, commanded the Apostles and disciples till the end of the age, to take the same Message/Gospel of the Kingdom of God to the whole world (Matt. 28:19, 20). This task has apparently been poorly executed, since professing Christians have used every descriptive term for the Gospel, *except* the one always found on the lips of Jesus, "the Gospel of the Kingdom." If we compare Luke 9:11 with Acts 28:30, 31 we find that Jesus and Paul typically "welcomed the people" and immediately began to address the most crucial of all Gospel topics, the Kingdom of God. Astonishingly, some today do not even believe that the Gospel Jesus preached should be preached at all. They suppose, quite mistakenly, that Paul was given a different Gospel for the Gentiles. If this were so, Paul would have put himself under his own curse (Gal. 1:8, 9) for abandoning the one and only true saving Gospel. There is only one saving Gospel Message offered to every human being. The Gospel of grace is identical to the Gospel of the Kingdom (Acts 20:24, 25).

The importance of the Kingdom Gospel cannot be exaggerated. In it Jesus offers us the elixir of life. He presents a message for our intelligent reception which promises us life indefinitely. Here is how the Message of immortality works. First you have to hear it declared clearly. Secondly you have to grasp it with understanding, the understanding of a "child" whose eyes and ears are open to divine revelation (see Eph. 1:13). Thirdly you have to maintain it in your life, despite the perennial distractions of persecution, worry, and desire for other things (Luke 8:15). All this Jesus made entirely clear in his most fundamental illustration about the seed and soils (the parable of the sower, Matt. 13; Mark 4; Luke 8). In that wonderful theological "comparison" Jesus said that salvation is a process which must begin, continue and persist to the end. It all depends on an initial intelligent acceptance of the "seed" Gospel of the Kingdom as Jesus

⁴ Matt. 4:17, 23; 9:35; 24:14, 15; Luke 4:43; Acts 1:3, 6; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31.

preached it. Only those who maintain faith and obedience to the end will be saved (Matt. 24:13). Salvation for New Testament Christians is like a race. The goal, salvation, “is now closer to us than when we first believed” (Rom. 13:11). We are “being saved” now (1 Cor. 1:18; 15:2), and we were saved “in hope” (Rom. 8:24), and we will be saved at the return of Jesus.

You don’t win a gold medal when the starting gun goes off and you don’t graduate from the university at orientation. Salvation is a race to the end and the stimulus which gets us started is the Gospel of the Kingdom, which imparts to us the energy of God Himself (1 Thess. 2:13; John 6:63; Gal. 3:2).

How Life Forever Is Obtained

Here is how life forever and ever is to be acquired. You hear the Gospel/Word of the Kingdom. You understand it and you respond to it by making it the first priority in your life. You value it so highly that you (figuratively speaking) sell all your properties in order to buy the one field which contains the treasure, the pearl of great price, the secret of immortality. When you are in pursuit of life forever, what else could possibly make an equal demand on your attention?

How does that spark of life arise within you? It is a new creation by the word of God. The word of the Gospel is God’s creative tool, a “spark” of His own immortality imparted via the words of Jesus to believing man. “Word of God” does not just mean the Bible as a whole. (The Bible generally calls itself “the Scriptures.”) It means the Gospel of the Kingdom, the Message of immortality and how to gain it (Matt. 13:19, word of the Kingdom = Mark 4:14, the word = Luke 8:11, the word of God). The word is God’s creative tool. It is a part of Himself and expresses His desire for us as humans. With His creative word He intends to share and impart His own immortality. He wants human beings to live forever. He wants to give us (by His grace) endless life and He imparts His “seed” to us, to spark that new life and vitality which is the beginning or downpayment — first installment — of immortality (Eph. 1:14). When that “seed” is taken into our hearts and minds, we have made the transition from death to life.

John 5:24 summarizes the salvation process brilliantly: “Truly I tell you: he who *hears my word* [Gospel Message] and believes Him who commissioned me has eternal life [the Life of the Age to Come, Dan. 12:2]. He does not come into judgment, but has made the transition from death to life.”

Everything depends on hearing, grasping and holding on — in the face of difficulty, distraction, affliction and persecution — to that precious word/Gospel of the Kingdom. No wonder Jesus described the Kingdom in terms calculated to impress on us its inestimable value as the pearl of great price, the treasure above all treasures.

The saving Message of Jesus is called a seed (Luke 8:11). That seed must lodge in our minds. It is sown by the one preaching. It must be received “in an honest heart” (Luke 8:15). Those who welcome that seed “in a good and honest heart” must “bear fruit *with patience*” (Luke 8:15). All the Bible writers tell the same Gospel story. All offer the same “formula” for immortality. The “mechanics” or process of embarking on the immortality program are common to all the New Testament writers. James said that this rebirth, the germination of new life from the seed of the Gospel, is through the word, the word of the Truth (James 1:18; cp. “Your word is truth,” John 17:17). The word must take root within us: “Receive with meekness the word planted [i.e., sown] within you, which is able to save you” (James 1:21). That word is the Gospel of the Kingdom of God as Jesus preached it. Matthew called it the “word of the Kingdom” (Matt. 13:19). James, of course, knew all about the parable of the sower. Peter, as chief spokesman for the Messiah, made quite sure that we remember the process of salvation, the science of gaining immortality by being born again. He spoke, as had Jesus and his half-brother James, of the word of the Gospel as “incorruptible seed” (1 Pet. 1:23) — a seed, in other words, which carries in itself the germ of immortality. The seed transmits the very nature of God Himself. By participating in that nature, via the seed of the Kingdom Message sown in our hearts, we are participating in the indestructible life of God Himself. The seed, received and retained, creates in us a new root of personality, makes us new creatures, reborn human beings destined to live forever (1 Pet. 1:23-25). The indispensable key to this miraculous second birth is the “word which was preached to you *as the Gospel*” (1 Pet. 1:25). That Message discloses the secret of the divine plan in Christ for human destiny.

John the Apostle knew about the seed and how it is the key to being “born again” with a view to immortality. In John 3:3 he reports Jesus as saying to a Jewish scholar: “Unless you are born again you cannot enter the Kingdom.” No rebirth, no living forever. And no rebirth without a living “seed.” John later reminded his readers that rebirth comes from

seed. He too knew the immense value of Jesus' precious teaching about the seed and the soils. John said that the person who "has been born again cannot continue in sin, because *God's seed* remains in him" (1 John 3:9). In making rebirth the absolutely essential prerequisite for immortality, Jesus made it clear that the reception of the Kingdom Gospel was the key to life forever: "Unless you receive the Kingdom of God as a little child, you will not enter it" (Luke 18:17). "If you do not listen to and grasp the Gospel of the Kingdom (the word), you cannot repent and be forgiven" (see Mark 4:11, 12). Mark here, reporting Jesus, makes an intelligent, open-eyed grasp of the Kingdom Gospel as Jesus preached it the condition of repentance and forgiveness. The Devil, knowing how fatal the Kingdom Gospel is to his own opposing activity, attempts to "snatch away the word which has been sown in their hearts, so that they cannot believe it and be saved" (Luke 8:12).

Here in the parable of the sower is the very heart of Jesus' immortality Message. Listen to the extraordinary words of the Master Rabbi, from a boat anchored just off the shore of the Lake of Galilee:

"To you has been graciously given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but to those who are outside everything comes as a puzzle, so that seeing they may not see and it will not be clear to them, and hearing it they will not get the sense. *If they did*, they would turn to God in repentance and be forgiven." And he said to them, "If you are not clear about this parable, how will you be clear about any of the others?" (Mark 4:11-13).

Paul and Rebirth

Paul of course was no stranger to the secrets of immortality. He taught that rebirth, regeneration, happens by the renewing power of the spirit of God (Gal. 4:29) via the Gospel (Gal. 3:2). Christians are those who are born of the spirit, born of the promises made to Abraham (Gal. 4:23), recipients of "the holy spirit of the promise" (Eph. 1:13). It makes no difference whether we speak of the spirit of God or the word of God as the tool of rebirth. Both the spirit and the word mean the creative presence and power of God, as He undertakes His mightiest and most miraculous work: the production in human beings of the spark of immortality, the gift of Life in the Coming Age/Kingdom. In Genesis "God's spirit hovered over the chaos" and "God said..." (Gen. 1:2, 3). God's word was active with His spirit. (Spirit is to the divine word as human breath is to spoken utterance.) The creative activity of God through the

Gospel stimulates the new life of the believer. "The Spirit comes through hearing the Gospel Message" (see Gal. 3:2).

Paul reminded Titus of the immortality "program." "When the goodness and gracious kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us [through Jesus' preaching and his death and resurrection], not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but through His mercy, by the washing of rebirth and renewal in the holy spirit (Titus 3:4, 5).

It was Jesus, the original Gospel preacher (Heb. 2:3; cp. 1 Tim. 6:3), who was equipped with the saving word/words of God Himself (John 5:24). The Father, using Jesus as His perfect agent and emissary, gave Jesus the creative words with which we can be infused with the new life of rebirth. "The words I speak to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63). They contain the very energy and vitality of God Himself. They operate as an energizing power in our life (1 Thess. 2:13; Rom. 1:16). They bring the influence of the spirit, which is the operational presence of God, into our experience and our thinking (Ps. 51:10-12; 139:7). They produce in the end a condition of endless life, for those who have taken the words of life to heart and, after being baptized (Acts 8:12, etc.), continue to bear fruit to the end.

Paul's comment marks him out as a genuine disciple of Jesus, showing that he was following the Master as a preacher of the Kingdom of God Gospel. He spoke to the Colossians of "the hope reserved in heaven with Christ." That hope, Paul said, was the source of Christian faith and love (Col. 1:4, 5). What terrible damage would be done, then, to faith and love if *the hope* which produces these virtues was not clearly understood! The hope in question had been transmitted to them "in the word of the Truth, the Gospel" (Col. 1:5), reminding us again of the parable of the sower. Paul described that saving Gospel and its hope as "bearing fruit and growing" (Col. 1:6). Once more the reference to Jesus' parable of the sower is clear.

Jesus came offering the public the Elixir of Life, the fountain of eternal youth. He offered it on his conditions, or rather the condition of the God of Israel who commissioned him to present the saving Gospel. He urged the public to embrace his Gospel of the coming Kingdom and the promise of ruling with Christ in the New Age of that Kingdom to be inaugurated on earth, "the inhabited earth of the future, about which we are speaking" (Heb. 2:5).

The ultimate goal of God's great purpose revealed in the Gospel is that His people would be in power as

princes in the place promised to Abraham and Messiah, the Land of the Promise, the earth transformed by the presence of Jesus who will then have returned to this planet. As Messiah he will “inherit the throne of his ancestor David” in Jerusalem (Luke 1:32). He will do this because he is God’s Son, so constituted by the miracle of creation effected by God in the womb of Mary (Luke 1:35; Matt. 1:20, “that which is begotten in her”).

One would think that more people would be interested in immortality, endless, indestructible life and fellowship with Jesus and his Father now and forever. Our human task is to search out the secret of life in perpetuity, the pearl of great price, the treasure of the Kingdom Gospel as Jesus preached it.

Did you hear any sermons recently about being born again with a view to immortality and how this happens by contact with the power of the word/seed/spirit contained in Jesus’ creative Kingdom of God Message?

Many have been short-changed by being told that the death and resurrection of Jesus alone are the whole of the Gospel. Paul said otherwise. He taught that the death and resurrection of Jesus are “among things of first importance” in the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:3). He himself was a career preacher of the Gospel of the Kingdom (Acts 20:24, 25). Jesus had labored for years, described in some 25 chapters of Matthew, Mark and Luke, preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, while saying, at that stage, not a word about his death and resurrection (see Matt. 16:21 for his first announcement of that part of the Gospel).

Creeds, however, appear to have missed the point of Jesus’ saving Message about immortality. They urge belief in his birth (“born of the Virgin Mary”) and then skip right over his Kingdom Gospel preaching career to his death (“suffered under Pontius Pilate...”).

Belief in Jesus apart from belief in his words does not measure up to the biblical definition of belief. “He who *hears my word* and believes Him who sent me has eternal life” (John 5:24). At the climax of his career Jesus issued a stern warning against rejection of his saving teaching. He could hardly have made it plainer (John 12:44-50; Matt. 7:21-27).

Throughout his ministry the Messiah requires belief in his Gospel Message. To drive a wedge between Jesus and his teaching undermines the entire constitution of apostolic Christianity. “Faith comes by

hearing and hearing through Messiah’s word” (Rom. 10:17).⁵✧

Comments

“I was taught in Bible College that whenever the Angel of the Lord appeared in the Old Testament it was a ‘Christophany.’ Since then I have discovered that this doctrine is false, and the story of the centurion gives it away. Both Matthew and Luke record it, but in Matthew 8:5ff the centurion himself approaches Jesus, while in Luke 7:1ff he sends the Jewish elders first, then his friends as his representatives. Now, we were taught that for a Jew it didn’t matter if he spoke to a person directly or through representatives; therefore Matthew presents a shorter version. I kept on wondering why we need to see ‘Christophanies’ in the Old Testament when this same principle can be applied. God sends His angels as His representatives through whom He communicates with men of the Old Testament. Thus Moses speaks to YHWH through the angel in the burning bush, etc. Perhaps in a sense we can also see Jesus acting as His representative (though I am new to this doctrine).” — *Australia*

“The Bible studies are going very well. We meet in Blantyre three times a week. We are still going through the Gospels, usually 1 1/2-2 hour sessions with several good questions. Tonight we will be covering, among other things, Lazarus and the rich man. I am brushing up from your booklet *What Happens When We Die?* It is good to have your material as refresher and to add proof. They are convinced about the Kingdom of God on earth. As you know, the Kingdom is so constantly reinforced in the Gospels by Christ, and in Acts. They see that God is not a Trinity.” — *Malawi*

⁵ It is disconcerting to hear a leading evangelical preacher of our time say, “Many people today think the essence of Christianity is Jesus’ teachings, but that is not so. If you read the Apostle Paul’s letters, which make up most of the New Testament, you’ll see that there’s almost nothing whatsoever said about the teachings of Jesus. Throughout the rest of the New Testament, there’s little reference to the teachings of Jesus, and in the Apostles’ Creed, the most universally-held Christian creed, there is no reference to Jesus’ teachings. There is also no reference to the example of Jesus. Only two days in the life of Jesus are mentioned — the day of his birth and the day of his death. *Christianity centers not in the teachings of Jesus, but in the person of Jesus as Incarnate God who came into the world to take upon himself our guilt and die in our place*” (D. James Kennedy, “Truths That Transform,” 11/17/89, emphasis his).