

Eight ANOTHER GOSPEL

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel (Gal. 1:6).

In his *Honest to Jesus*, Robert Funk tells a story about a man who plays “fetch the ball” with his dog. Every so often he pretends to throw the ball and then, while the dog is looking away, he actually throws it. Because the dog has not noticed this deception, he sits patiently at his master’s feet and waits. His master points in the direction of the ball. The dog, not understanding the meaning of that gesture, barks at the pointing finger. Then Funk applies the story to the Church. He says the later followers of Jesus are like that dog: Jesus points to some horizon in his parables, some fabulous yonder, something he called God’s estate (or Kingdom), which he sees but to which the rest of us are blind. Like dogs, we bark at the pointing finger, oblivious to the breathtaking scene behind us. All we need to do is turn around and look where he is pointing. The Jesus movement, the NT Church, very early on exchanged the vision. They were unable to hold on to the vision encapsulated in Jesus’ parables and other verbal vehicles, and they lost his story. They did not know how to celebrate Jesus’ vision of God’s Kingdom.¹

I was like that dog barking in the wrong direction, too. If anybody knew what preaching the Gospel was, I reckoned I did. Born and bred in solid Churches of Christ evangelical tradition, at 12 I went to the front of a church meeting and confessed Christ as my “personal Lord and Saviour” and was baptized by full immersion. I sat under a number of top-notch Australian and American evangelists throughout my teen years and heard them explain the Gospel to the “unsaved.” Then I went to Bible college in Sydney for four years and after graduation spent over a decade preaching the Gospel not just as a pastor in local churches, but also as an evangelist all over Australia (except in the state of Western

¹ Robert Funk, *Honest To Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium*, p. 10.

Australia). I “preached the gospel” in all sorts of meetings and settings, from open-air street preaching to large combined city-wide crusades, to one-on-one home door-knocking, to youth conventions, to businessmen’s breakfasts, to ladies’ coffee mornings, to radio programmes and even overseas. I helped lead hundreds to a personal faith in Christ at a fairly young age. Yes, I knew the Gospel. I could present the “Four Spiritual Laws,” and if you wanted to become a member of the Churches of Christ, I knew the longer “Five Finger” version, too!

The following quote from a Billy Graham Gospel tract was typical of my well-practised approach:

If you will read the epistles of Paul, you will notice the message centers in three things: the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Christ. As far as Paul was concerned, Christ Jesus came to do three days’ work: that work was commenced when he was nailed on the cross and was ended when God raised him from among the dead. Paul never discussed the earthly life of our Lord — his baptism, his temptation, his miracles, his teachings, or even his sufferings in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is quite in keeping with the rest of the New Testament, for we must remember that Christ came not primarily to preach the gospel (though he did herald deliverance to the prisoner), but he came rather that there might be a gospel to preach. This gospel was won and brought into being by his work on the cross. We should remember that Jesus Christ had lived the Sermon on the Mount for 30 years before he ever preached it. His teachings and his sinless life never changed a life nor delivered one person from the life of sin. Only his death on the cross could do that.²

Yes, sir. I would have given my hearty “Amen” to that version of the Gospel. Did not the apostle Paul tell us that Jesus essentially “came to do three days’ work”? Did not Paul agree that the Gospel message “centers in three things: the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Christ”? For he writes: “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins

² Roy Gustafson, *What Is the Gospel?* Billy Graham Evangelical Association, 1980.

according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

One day, however, it hit me that this classic definition of the Gospel does not say what most of us have been taught it says. Literally Paul wrote this: “For I delivered to you as **among the first things** what I also received.” Crucial and integral as the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus are to the Gospel, they are not the whole Gospel. These are truths *among* others (*en protois*) that constitute the Gospel. We ask, naturally, what are the other things of first importance in the Gospel? More critically, we must ask whether it is possible that the Gospel Paul preached has been (without our being aware of it) exchanged for “another gospel” (Gal. 1:6-7), a depleted gospel. In this chapter I show that much like the cuckoo that tips the legitimate eggs out of the nest to substitute its own — which grows into a monster far larger than the original owners of the nest — the modern evangelical gospel is an impostor that has replaced the Gospel as originally preached with a caricature. We will see that when “orthodox Christianity” encoded its convictions in its early creeds “affirmations about the Christ were fenced off from information about Jesus of Nazareth. The Apostles’ Creed implied nothing worth mentioning lay between the miraculous conception of Jesus and his death on the cross. The creed left a blank where Jesus should have come.”³ We will observe yet again how Hellenism reinterpreted Jesus’ Gospel in order to service the Church’s ecclesiastic programme.

Surely, if we are to understand the Gospel rightly, a good place to start would be with the Lord Jesus himself. It is for good reason he is called the pioneer, the inaugurator of the Christian faith (Heb. 12:2). Scripture insists that our great salvation “was at the **first spoken through the Lord**, and **confirmed** to us by those who heard” (Heb. 2:3). Jesus was the first Gospel preacher (not Peter, or Paul who subsequently “confirmed” the message!), so surely he will define for us his Gospel! And if we are to rightly understand Jesus of Nazareth and his Gospel, we must locate him within the Jewish world of Palestine in the first century. For whatever he said and whatever he did had to make sense — even if it was/is disturbing — within that cultural context. It is often said that Christianity is founded upon a person: Christianity is “Christ-in-you-ity”; its

³ Robert Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 303.

essence is a “personal relationship” with Christ himself. This is true. But it is only a dangerous half-truth. For if we are to understand Jesus the person and his mission, we must ask, *What was the person founded upon?* What was it that Jesus saw and sensed that was so enchanting, so mesmerizing, so challenging that it held him in its spell?

“The answer is that he was founded upon an idea, a strange idea current among the Jews of his time, an idea alien to Western thought which many non-Jewish theologians still find very inconvenient, the idea of Messianism. It was Messianism which made the life of Jesus what it was and so brought Christianity into being.”⁴ The ultimate conviction on which the whole edifice of Christianity rests is that in Jesus, the Messiah has come. This teaching was the Gospel underlying all the gospels, the Good News that Israel’s king and his Kingdom were being announced. Christianity gives lip service to the fundamental fact that Jesus was this Messiah, whose advent fulfilled all the old prophecies, but singularly fails to concentrate on how to understand this Messiah and his Gospel and thus how to get to know him. The Messiahship of Jesus is asserted, and then quickly side-stepped in order to disclose him in a light more congenial to Hellenic rather than Jewish concepts.⁵ In our unwrapping of the Gospel of the Kingdom that Jesus taught we must not make the same mistake. We start at the beginning.

At the commencement of his ministry we are told that: “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching **the gospel of God**, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and **the kingdom of God** is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14-15; also Matt. 4:17-23). To some of us with a “traditional” evangelical background it is strange to think that Jesus preached the Gospel! We think the apostles were the first Gospel preachers after Pentecost. After all, what Gospel was there to preach *before* the crucifixion, burial and resurrection? But Mark tells us that Jesus came preaching “the Gospel of God” at the beginning of his Galilean ministry. This was his opening manifesto: “Repent and believe the Gospel.”

From start to finish, Jesus constantly emphasized one theme: The promised Kingdom of God. Understanding what Jesus meant by “the Kingdom of God” is the key to understanding his mission,

⁴ Hugh Schonfield, *The Passover Plot*, pp. 22-23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

his God-given purpose, his *raison d'être*. To understand what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God is to understand the real Jesus. To miss what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God is to miss Jesus altogether. For Jesus defined the Gospel as the Gospel of the Kingdom. All other grids of reference in our understanding of his mission and message flow from this key phrase, "the Kingdom of God." We must not skip lightly over this *locus classicus*. To skip over Jesus' preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom would be to fatally divorce Jesus from his own message and context.

It is axiomatic that Jesus believed that the God of Israel, Jehovah, was his God and Father. He believed he was God's Anointed and destined for rulership in the coming Kingdom of God. He was the son of David with the blood of kings in his veins. "In that *Messiah* refers to the one whom God anoints, or delegates, to rule God's kingdom (see Psalm 2; Mark 15:32), everything that Jesus does from his baptism onward is immersed in the prophetic anticipation of the coming of the Kingdom of God."⁶ In announcing the Kingdom Gospel Jesus is announcing himself as the Messiah-designate. The most dramatic moment in all history was believed to have arrived with him. The time was now ripe for people to urgently prepare for that Kingdom's arrival. To ordinary people in that culture this could only mean one thing: Israel was at last going to be redeemed, rescued from oppression. N.T. Wright correctly observes:

God's "Kingdom" wasn't a state of mind, or a sense of inward peace. It was concrete, historical, real. Twentieth-century Western Christians need to shed a few ideas at this point. When people downed tools for a while and trudged off up a hillside to hear this Jesus talking, we can be sure they weren't going to hear someone tell them to be nice to each other; or that if they behaved themselves (or got their minds round the right theological scheme) there would be a rosy future waiting for them when they got to "heaven"; or that God had decided at last to do something about forgiving them for their sins. First-century Jews knew that they ought to be nice to each other. In so far as they thought at all about life after death, they believed that their God would look after them, and eventually give them new physical bodies in his renewed world. (The phrase

⁶ Robert Hach, *Possession and Persuasion*, p. 127.

“Kingdom of Heaven,” which we find in Matthew’s Gospel, does *not* mean a Kingdom-place called “heaven.” It is a reverent way of saying “the Kingship of God.”)

There is no sign that first-century Jews were walking around gloomily wondering how their sins were ever going to be forgiven. They had the Temple and the sacrificial system, which took care of all that. If Jesus had only said what a lot of Western Christians seem to think he said, he would have been just a big yawn-maker. What he in fact said was so revolutionary that it woke everybody up. It was so dramatic that Jesus seems to have adopted a deliberate policy of keeping to the villages, always moving quickly on, never getting into the big Galilean towns like Sepphoris, just over the hill from Nazareth, or Tiberias, down by the sea of Galilee, just south of Magdala.⁷

The Good News — that is, the Gospel of the Kingdom — that Israel was waiting for was that the Messianic deliverance was imminent. To say that “the Kingdom of God is at hand” was to those people a way of saying that Caesar, and his delegate Pontius Pilate, and Herod should not be controlling God’s people. It was announcing that God Himself would be stepping in through His appointed delegates, the Messiah with his saints. “No King but God” was the revolutionary catch-cry of the day. Thus, the word “Gospel” had a crystal clear Messianic and political significance to it. To announce that the Kingdom was “at hand” meant Israel’s King was here and the Kingdom was coming. The nation of Israel was on tiptoe with anticipation that had built up over many generations. Every year the Messianic hope was felt more keenly. In fact, on every Sabbath in every synagogue in the Jewish world of Jesus’ generation, they offered up the prayer: “Speedily cause the offspring of David, thy servant, to flourish, and let his horn be exalted by thy salvation, because we wait for thy salvation all the day. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who causest the horn of salvation to flourish” (*Benediction 15*).

Like a refugee amongst the nations of the world, Israel would soon be liberated. The prophetic word could not fail of fulfilment. Most in first-century Israel believed it was the eleventh hour. And it was certainly not a kingdom in the clouds they longed for. It was the

⁷ N.T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* pp. 97-98.

reign of God over a perfected earth, at a definite point in history, under the Lord Messiah.

Hugh Schonfield makes the point that in the year AD 35 Caesar made a public proclamation throughout the empire signifying his mastery over his subjects; for every citizen of the empire this was Caesar's acceptable year of "Lordship." But in contradistinction, Jesus proclaims in the synagogue *that very same year* that because he is the Messiah it is indeed "the acceptable year of the Lord." (Even if we do not agree with Schonfield's chronology, the point is still culturally valid.) Jesus' Gospel proclamation was a seditious move:

Messianism represented the conviction that the existing world order would presently be overthrown. The empire ruled by Caesar and his legions would pass away, and in its place there would be the Kingdom of God governed by the Messiah and his people. Christianity identified the Messiah with Jesus. There was "another king," another emperor, to whom allegiance was transferred.⁸

The fact that Jesus was eventually crucified and buried did not mean that Caesar rested easy. Even in AD 70 when the Roman legions finally breached the walls of Jerusalem, Vespasian commanded all of the family of David to be sought and executed so that no one of the royal Davidic stock might be left. Eusebius also mentions that the emperors Domitian (96 AD) and Trajan (120 AD) mercilessly persecuted Jews of the Davidic line of descent.⁹

So to Jewish ears the expression "the Kingdom of God" carried a huge (national) connotation. Their Hebrew Bible contained the recurrent theme that God was going to send the Messiah to be His agent to bring about the end of the world as it is currently run, and introduce a whole new world order. The government of that age would be upon his shoulder (Is. 9:6). This Messiah was to be the son of David. (The title "son of David" is used of Jesus at least 14 times in the gospels and means that he claimed to be the legitimate king of Israel.) It meant that he would sit on the throne of David in a new Jerusalem. The enemies of God's people would be judged. Truth and justice would cover the earth. All nations of the earth would be blessed through Israel's exalted status. Even the very natural order

⁸ Schonfield, *The Passover Plot*, p. 226.

⁹ *Eccl. Hist.* III, xii, xix-xx, xxxii, 3-4.

would be completely transformed, to the point where dangerous animals would no longer hunt and tear apart, and where little children could play unharmed with them; the desert would blossom (Is. 11:6-9). In short, the glory of God, through the Messiah and his people would cover the earth as the waters cover the sea:

The Messianic mission of Jesus had as its objective the preparation of men for the future Kingdom of God. Jesus constantly looked forward to the coming of the eschatological Kingdom when the final judgment would effect a separation of men, the righteous entering into the life and blessings of the Kingdom, and the wicked into the doom of punishment.¹⁰

Jesus of Nazareth saw himself as God's appointed agent, the Messiah. He knew his destiny. He was the Son of God who was to bring all of these promises God had given to the prophets to completion. As noted previously, we tend to cloud things somewhat by calling him Jesus Christ. But it must be remembered that Christ is not a proper name, but a title. It is more correct to speak not of Jesus Christ, but of Jesus *the* Christ. To call Jesus the Christ is to give him the title of Messiah. To a Jew to call someone the Christ, the Messiah, was to assign to that person both a political as well as a theological role. Jesus belonged within a world where theology and politics went hand in hand. The theology was that of Jewish monotheism. But not just any abstract monotheism about there being only one God. The Jews believed *their* God YHWH (Yahweh/Jehovah) was the only God, and that all other "gods" were idols, either concrete creations of human hands or abstract creations of human minds. Jesus shared this belief that Israel's God was the only true God. This God was his Father. Thus, Jewish monotheism went hand in hand with the doctrine of "election." They believed they were the "chosen people" of this one true God, destined under God's Messiah to enter his Kingdom when it came. This is and was the essence of the Christian Gospel.

To proclaim Jesus as the Lord's Messiah was as good as proclaiming him as king. When Andrew finds his brother Simon he announces, "We have found **the Messiah**...Rabbi, you are **the Son of God**, you are **the king of Israel**" (John 1:41, 49). Martha confesses, "I have come to believe that you are **the Messiah, the**

¹⁰ G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 181.

Son of God” (John 11:27). The high priest interrogates Jesus, “I adjure you by the living God, that you tell us whether you are **the Christ, the Son of God.**” Jesus said to him, ‘You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see **the Son of Man** sitting at the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven” (Matt. 26:63-64). The soldiers mocked Jesus, “‘Hail, **king of the Jews,**’ and they struck him repeatedly...The Jews answered...‘According to the law he ought to die, because he made himself the **Son of God**” (John 19:3, 7). When he was hanging on the cross the taunt was “Let the **Messiah, the king of Israel** come down from the cross that we may see and believe” (Mark 15:32). These texts could be multiplied many times over. They all prove that the terms Messiah, Son of God, son of Man, and king are synonymous. This usage is strictly in accord with the OT background, especially places like Psalm 2 which uses the descriptions “**My Son,**” “**My king,**” and “**Messiah**” interchangeably for the promised saviour who is to come: “The rulers take counsel together against the LORD and against **His Anointed [Messiah]**...but as for Me I have installed **My King** upon Zion...You are **My Son,** today I have begotten you” (Ps. 2:2, 6-7). It can be seen that the NT titles for Jesus were already in existence in the Hebrew Bible:

Messiah = the Son of God = the Son of Man = the king of Israel

It is an incontrovertible fact that for the three centuries before Augustine, the Kingdom was seen this way. It was an altogether *eschatological* Kingdom. (Remember the word *eschatological* comes from a Greek word meaning the study of the end times.) The Kingdom was seen to be the inbreaking of God through Christ at the end of this present age, when the dead “in Christ” would be raised to life again, and the earth would experience the conditions of the garden of Eden all over again. The Messiah would sit on the throne of David and his headquarters would be in a new Jerusalem. There is a famous exchange between a fellow called Trypho and Justin Martyr that highlights the political aspect of the Gospel. It runs like this:

Trypho: Do you really admit that this place Jerusalem shall be rebuilt? And do you expect your people to be gathered together, and made joyful with Christ and the patriarchs...?

Justin: I and many others are of that opinion, and believe that this will take place, as you are assuredly

aware...Moreover I pointed out to you that some who are called Christians, but are godless, impious heretics, teach doctrines that are in every way blasphemous, atheistical and foolish...I choose to follow not men or men's teachings, but God and the doctrines delivered by Him. For if you have fallen with some who are called Christians, but who do not admit the truth of the resurrection...who say that there is no resurrection of the dead, and that their souls when they die are taken to heaven, do not imagine that they are Christians...But I and others who are right-minded Christians on all points are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned and enlarged, as the prophets Ezekiel, Isaiah and others declare...We have perceived, moreover, that the expression, "the Day of the Lord" is connected with this subject. And further, there was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the Apostles of Christ, who prophesied by a revelation that was made to him that those who believed in our Christ would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem; and that thereafter the general and the eternal resurrection of all men would take place.¹¹

The early Christians believed the "Gospel of the Kingdom" related to this glorious future reign of God on earth, through His appointed Messiah. Christians believed God had destined that they "reign upon the earth" with Messiah (Rev. 5:10). All who joined Jesus in repentance and faith would be the elite of the final world order, entitled to the highest honours because of their loyalty to him in this present world. To the early Christians the Gospel of "salvation" related to the reality of God's promised future of a renewed earth. To "be saved" meant being preserved in the day of Messianic judgment, and being entitled to reign with the Messiah in his terrestrial (earthly) kingdom. Gentile believers were assured of equal privileges with Jewish believers and would inherit with them the same promises originally made to Abraham and to Israel. In a moment we will explore this thought further. It suffices for the minute to say that the apostles and the first generation(s) of Christians firmly expected Christ's Kingdom to be publicly

¹¹ *Dialogue with Trypho.*

established in their lifetime. But as their Lord delayed his coming, and with each succeeding generation not seeing this hope materialize, the hope of the future earthly Kingdom began to fade. The Church exchanged its end-time future hope of the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached for the belief that the Church *itself* was in fact the Kingdom of God on earth already. Jesus' Gospel of the *eschatological* Kingdom of God was replaced by a post-apostolic gospel of the *ecclesiastical* kingdom of God. For mainstream Christianity, the Church *became* the kingdom: From Augustine onwards, it became official church dogma that the kingdom had already come! Salvation was no longer to be received when Christ returned. Salvation could only be found in the Church's priesthood and programmes. The Kingdom was no longer without; it was "within the heart." Salvation was no longer tied to God's redemption in future history; it was now an inner spiritual perception, held in custody and administered only by the "Church."

An obvious difficulty in defending the mainstream interpretation that the Kingdom is the Church, and is limited to what is within (spiritual and personal), is that the apocalyptic and cosmic elements in Jesus' view of the coming Kingdom are eliminated. The apostles' hope of resurrection from the grave at Christ's return when he sets up his Kingdom by a spectacular intervention has been replaced by the Platonic heaven-for-the soul-when-you-die gospel. This non-apocalyptic, non-eschatological interpretation of the Kingdom — the Kingdom is primarily a personal religious experience of the presence of King Jesus ruling in the individual's heart — omits two key elements in Jesus' Gospel. Firstly, as we have seen, it dismisses *the historical Hebrew setting in which Jesus did all his teaching*. Theologians call this the *Sitz im Leben*, the real life setting of Jesus. "It is clear, again from Josephus and elsewhere, that the idea of God's becoming King was not about an inner set of ideals, a 'Kingdom' invisible to the naked eye but quietly transforming people's inner motivations. It was about the expected dramatic reversal in Israel's fortunes."¹²

Secondly, it completely ignores *the apocalyptic element* of Jesus' preaching of the coming Kingdom. It ignores the cataclysmic and cosmic climax that will end this present world order. There have been many commentators who would have us believe that

¹² N.T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* p. 56.

when Jesus preached the Gospel of the Kingdom he was simply giving us the shell. The “real” message is the “spiritual” kernel hidden inside that Hebrew husk. To get to the real message of Jesus we must crack open that useless, out-of-date Jewish capsule before we can swallow the health-giving gospel vitamin. This approach consigns Jesus’ announcement of the Kingdom to “interim ethics,” only relevant to that day. Fortunately, some contemporary scholarship has seen through this out of character “spiritualizing” view of the Kingdom. They rightly recognize that if we rip the Jew Jesus from his historical setting, we run the risk of creating “another Jesus” and of presenting “a different gospel” (2 Cor. 11:4). Some recent scholarship thankfully is recognizing that Jesus’ Gospel of the Kingdom cannot be uprooted from its original first-century soil. For the Hebrew, the prophetic hope expected the Kingdom of God to arise out of history and in history at the end of this present evil age. Jesus never made his Gospel a purely inward, private matter. He kept it in line with this rich Hebrew heritage. Jesus did not deviate from the earthly hope centred in a ruling descendant of David governing the world from Jerusalem, supervising a society redeemed from the curse of all evil. First-century Jews who knew the Hebrew prophets understood this very well. Early apostolic Christianity founded on Jesus’ Gospel of the Kingdom also understood it. Subsequent ecclesiasticism serving its own ends conveniently changed it.

There is a critical need to restore the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). Failure to reinstate the Gospel message in its own native Hebrew environment will guarantee the ongoing confusion that has existed since the Church lost her belief in the Gospel of the Kingdom as Jesus preached it. The call to “accept Jesus” as one’s “personal Lord and Saviour” must not be divorced from believing his preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom. *Jesus made an intelligent understanding of his Kingdom message the indispensable condition for salvation.* He said that “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart” (Matt. 13:19). Refusal to believe this Kingdom message and to repent is to miss his Good News, for he announced that failure to hear and see “the mystery of the Kingdom of God” would have the disastrous consequence of not being forgiven (see Mark 4:11-12). Repentance, then, is a complete reorientation of

one's world view. Repentance involves an understanding of Jesus' message with a heart commitment to his Kingdom ideal. *Without belief in his message, and commitment to his Kingdom vision, there can be no forgiveness and no salvation.* To "receive Christ" is to believe that through his death, burial and resurrection we are assured entrance into the life of that coming Messianic age. To be "born again" is to "see the Kingdom of God," that is, first to understand the Kingdom plan and finally to enter the Life of the Age to Come (John 3:3).

The foundation of Jesus' Gospel centres on the announcement of the Messianic Kingdom. A Kingdom-less Gospel is a Gospel without the Jesus of the Bible, for the authentic Jesus clearly equates salvation with receiving his Kingdom-word. It is this message of the Kingdom that carries the life-giving energy of God, the seed, according to Jesus himself (Matt. 13:19; Luke 8:11). To believe the word of the Kingdom is to receive his seed into our souls. This is to "be born according to the Spirit" which is to be "born according to the promise" (Gal. 4:22-23, 28-29). To hear "the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation" is to be "sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Eph. 1:13). The apostle Peter equates salvation with being "born again" by receiving "the living and abiding word of God" which is "the word which was preached to you" (1 Pet. 1:23-25). When we put these verses together we get the equation:

The Gospel of the Kingdom = the word of God = the spirit of promise = salvation = (the agent of the) new birth

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians that the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus are "amongst things of primary importance," the point under discussion must be kept in mind; some Corinthian Christians were beginning to question and doubt the resurrection. "How do some among you say there is no resurrection of the dead?" Paul asks (1 Cor. 15:12). It is to answer this particular crisis of belief that Paul reminds his readers that the death and resurrection of Jesus are absolutely fundamental to the Christian Gospel. *Without the death of Jesus giving assurance of forgiveness, and without the resurrection of Jesus from the grave, there will be no salvation in the coming Kingdom of God.* If Jesus has not been raised to life again, then the hope of salvation which is the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth is a forlorn hope. Before Calvary and Easter Sunday, Jesus and the apostles preached the Gospel for years

without any inclusion of these great redemptive facts. After Easter Sunday, the apostles (as we shall soon see) still preached the Gospel of the future Kingdom, but were then able to supply as vital information guaranteeing that Kingdom, the facts of Jesus' death and resurrection. Vital and crucial as the death and resurrection of Christ are, they are not the bedrock. They are "among the first things" that Paul preached (1 Cor. 15:3). For Paul the climax of the Gospel is when God's Messiah "delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father" (1 Cor. 15:24). Thus Paul is in total agreement with Jesus' "Gospel of the Kingdom," for there is an unbreakable link between the resurrection of the dead and the coming of the Kingdom.

We are saying that the big reason why the mainstream "orthodox" interpretation that Jesus came only to do three days' work cannot be defended biblically is because it ignores the historical life-setting of Jesus' ministry. Historically, Jesus first preached to Jews, not the Church; Jesus founded his Church with Jewish apostles and converts, though his message was later offered to the nations and has timeless implications of course. Jesus proclaimed his very Hebrew-oriented Gospel of the Kingdom to first-century Jews and later authorized the same saving Gospel for us all. "It makes all the difference to our understanding of Christianity if we are enabled to apprehend that it did not begin as a new religion but as a movement of monotheistic Jews who held Jesus to be their God-sent king and deliverer. Here in a sentence, is what is imperative to know about the origins of Christianity," says Schonfield.¹³ To avoid creating a Gentile (pagan!) Jesus, his announcement that "the Kingdom of God is at hand" must be considered within the framework of Judaism. Jesus was not a "Christian" in our modern sense. He was a first-century Jewish prophet. The Jewish world view at that time "grew directly out of Jewish monotheism: Israel's God was the one God of all the world. Theology and politics, piety and revolution, went hand in hand."¹⁴ When Yahweh becomes king, Israel will be rescued from evil domination, and God Himself will return to Zion; the Kingdom will have arrived. "It was about Israel's story reaching its climax, about

¹³ Schonfield, *The Passover Plot*, p. 22.

¹⁴ N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1999, p. 33.

Israel's history moving toward its decisive moment."¹⁵ Jesus' call to repent and believe this Gospel announcement had much more than modern connotations of individual salvation in mind, more than "believe in Jesus and when you die you will live forever in heaven." Jesus was summoning his hearers to seize the moment and take up their proper role in God's unfolding drama. If they accepted Jesus as their promised Messianic Lord, and followed him in his new way, then they would be the true Israel, the true people of God, when God's Kingdom day arrived.

He Was Despised and Rejected by All

We must remember that Palestine at the time of Christ was not a fairy-tale land. It was a real world with real people. When Jesus was born, Palestine was ruled by an insecure, egotistical king called King Herod the Great (37-4 BC). His reign overlapped those of other secular figures such as Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, Mark Antony, and Augustus. The contemporary Jewish historian Josephus describes Herod as a megalomaniac whose whole reign was spent listening to his spies tell of plots from all and sundry. He even murdered the wife he loved dearly out of suspicion of a plot to dethrone him. When he knew he was dying, Herod arranged the murders of many prominent citizens, so that instead of celebrations at his passing there would be genuine mourning throughout Palestine! Herod could not even claim to be a Jew by birth. He was a native of Idumea, the non-Judaic desert region to the south of Palestine. In order to gain legitimacy for his kingship, Herod divorced his first wife and married a recognized Jewess. He tried to ingratiate himself with the Jews by rebuilding the Temple of Jerusalem. Such measures did not succeed in winning Jewish affection. He always remained reviled and distrusted. In fact, the Jewish nation considered Herod to be a sign of God's displeasure for their national sins. To many Jews, Herod was a sign that God had abandoned His people. This heightened their desire for a king who would restore Israel to her favoured position. This spiritual leader when he appeared would be the Davidic Messiah, and he would be their rightful king. Sanctioned by God, anointed by God, this man would drive the cursed Gentiles from the Promised Land and bring about a glorious regime in the tradition of David.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Herod of course is infamous for his Massacre of the Innocents as recorded in Matthew 2. As soon as he heard the rumour that one who might be the long-hoped for Jewish Messiah was to be born, Herod was deeply perturbed. He enquired of the chief priests and scribes where this Christ was to be born. The fact that Herod felt threatened by the baby Jesus was due to powerful public expectation of the arrival of a rightful Messianic ruler. The Romans had a policy of appointing local men to act as kings on Caesar's behalf. Herod would have reasoned that with a legitimate Jewish claimant to the throne of Israel Rome might recognise the infant Jesus' royal bloodline. It was not the son of poor Jews whom this usurper feared, but one who by virtue of inherent and regal genealogical qualification might — when grown — be able to rally popular backing. Herod also burned the archives of Jewish families, including those descended from Ruth and thus David, so he would not be embarrassed by references to his own base origins. Presumably Herod was most interested in the genealogies that could challenge his own position as king. Our point is simply to stress the very real national milieu in which Jesus arrived. The appellation "Messiah" was loaded with political gunpowder. When Jesus preached that the Kingdom of God was at hand, this was the kind of talk which signified that God's intervention was near. It was equivalent to announcing his heaven-sanctioned kingship.

The Roman legate at the time, Pontius Pilate, was ruthlessly loyal to Rome. He probably arrived in Caesarea during the spring of 26 AD. Josephus, the Jewish historian who was born a few years after Jesus' death, tells us that Pilate, the procurator of Judea:

removed the army from Caesarea to Jerusalem, to take their winter quarters there, *in order to abolish the Jewish laws*. So he introduced Caesar's effigies, which were upon the ensigns, and brought them into the city...Pilate was the first who brought these images to Jerusalem, and set them up there; which was done without the knowledge of the people, because it was done in the night time.¹⁶

Eusebius tells us that Pilate's agenda was to carry out the policy of his mentor Sejanus. This was to achieve "the destruction of the whole Jewish race."¹⁷ Setting up Rome's offensive military

¹⁶ *Antiquities*, 18, 3, 1, italics mine.

¹⁷ Eusebius, *Proof*, 11, 5.

standards was a deliberate part of Pilate's campaign "to abolish the Jewish laws." These standards displayed portraits of Caesar and Roman eagles, graven images highly provocative to Jews. Perhaps even worse, Pilate's Tenth Legion flaunted their own insignia of a bull and a boar. To Jews the pig was an unclean animal, whose flesh they were forbidden to eat or even touch. Josephus does not tell us where these effigies were set up, but historians conjecture that it must have been in the Antonia Fortress directly overlooking the Temple courts. Come daybreak, the city was in an uproar.

A Jewish delegation protested to the Roman tribune, but Pilate refused to remove the standards "because it would tend to the injury of Caesar." For five days the pressure continued. Pilate would not budge. Josephus continues the story:

On the sixth day he ordered his soldiers to have their weapons privately, while he came and sat upon his judgment-seat, which was so prepared in the open place of the city, that it concealed the army that lay ready to oppress them; and when the Jews petitioned him again, he gave a signal to the soldiers to encompass them around, and threatened that their punishment should be no less than immediate death, unless they would leave off disturbing him, and go their ways home. But they threw themselves upon the ground, and lay their necks bare, and said they would take their deaths very willingly, rather than the wisdom of their laws should be transgressed.

It was a tense moment, with thousands of Jews ready to have their throats cut for the sake of their faith, and a thousand Roman soldiers at the ready with swords drawn, looking to Pilate for his signal. Josephus says Pilate was deeply affected "by their firm resolution to keep their laws inviolable." Perhaps the repercussions of such a large-scale massacre unnerved Pilate, but in any case, he removed the Roman effigies from Jerusalem. Some commentators suggest that this action had immediate impact on Israel. Daniel the prophet had forewarned of "the abomination of desolation" when a brutal ruler will vent his fury on the Holy Covenant: "His soldiers in his command will desecrate the sanctuary and citadel [fortress]; they will abolish the regular offering, and will set up 'the abomination that causes desolation'" (Dan. 11:31).

Although Jesus later puts this "abomination of desolation" as still future and close to the end of age (see Matt. 24:15-16) it is easy

to see how Pilate's action in that day would have made tongues wag. They had just witnessed an abomination. This was a portent of the coming Kingdom. The end time had surely come. If Pilate's desecration of Jerusalem was a fulfilment of the Daniel prophecy, then Messiah would soon set up the Kingdom of God. It was at about this time that John the Baptist stepped out of the desert, calling the nation to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" and "make ready the way of the Lord" (Matt. 3:1-3). At the risk of repetition, let us understand that in that first century such talk was not "pie-in-the-sky" stuff. The Kingdom was not going to be set up in the clouds. It was a Kingdom-rule of God through His Messiah in Judea with ultimate control over the world.

But if Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom of God was the equivalent of placing sticks of political dynamite around Palestine, challenging Herod and Caesar, it was also the equivalent of placing religious gelignite amongst his own countrymen. Wherever he went, Jesus turned accepted religious convention on its head. How could Israel enter God's promised Kingdom when they themselves were a society full of social and economic injustices? How could this people enter the Kingdom with such an oppressive and corrupt Temple priesthood? How could those revolutionaries who believed the Kingdom would only come by violent means enter that new society based on love and service and equality? God's people must themselves first repent. They must become worthy of this high calling. That is, they must give up their own agendas and commit to Jesus' way. "This is not to say that Jesus did not give this challenge what we would call a religious and spiritual dimension. It is to insist that we cannot use that to screen out the practical and political challenge that the words would convey."¹⁸ Failure to accept Jesus' Gospel agenda would also disqualify *them*. Jesus called these blind, self-righteous Jews "children of the Devil" (John 8:44). This went down like a lead balloon. What scandal. What effrontery to call Abraham's children accursed! They thought they were being loyal to Jehovah. But instead of the light of the world, Jesus called them darkness. They were not going to enter the Kingdom unless they repented and took up his cross. Nor were they prepared to accept Jesus' risky agenda of turning the other cheek, going the second mile, losing their lives in loving service, forgiving the debts and sins

¹⁸ N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 38.

of their oppressors, and praying for their enemies. Jesus' Kingdom would be filled with the meek, the kind and gentle, the poor in spirit. As N.T. Wright correctly asserts, the Sermon on the Mount:

is not simply a grand new moral code. It is primarily the challenge of the Kingdom: the summons to Israel to be Israel indeed at the critical junction of her history, the moment when, in the Kingdom announcement of Jesus, the living God is at work to reconstitute his people and so fulfill his long-cherished intentions for them and for the whole world.¹⁹

But as it turned out, Jesus' agenda was too risky, too radical. His own people "did not receive him" (John 1:11).

The Cleansing of the Temple Announces Jesus' Messiahship

Jesus' clash with the established secular and sacred symbols of the day reached its climax in the week before his crucifixion. Israel's moment of destiny had arrived. "Israel, the historical people of the one creator God, was swimming in the stream of history just above a roaring waterfall. If she didn't watch out, she would be swept right over, and fall to her doom."²⁰ Would the nation accept his Messianic credentials and agenda or miss their hour? The nation was deeply divided. The Pharisees were harsh and critical of their fellow Jews. The Essenes regarded all other Jews — the Pharisees included — of being worthy only of God's anathemas. The Temple priesthood was corrupt and oppressive. Jesus claimed to be the way to fulfill all Israel's promised Kingdom hopes that God would vindicate him and those who trusted his word. He claimed to fulfill the Law and all that the prophets had spoken. He claimed to be Lord of the Sabbath. He claimed to have the authority to forgive sins, but they accused him of blaspheming, for who can forgive sin but God alone (Mark 2:7)?

But these various skirmishes with his countrymen reached their climax when Jesus entered the Temple precinct at the close of his ministry. The Temple possessed huge royal significance. In fact, Temple and kingship went hand in hand. David had planned the first Temple. Solomon had built it. Two great men of God, Hezekiah and Josiah, had restored it. The Maccabees had cleansed the Temple.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁰ N.T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* p. 101.

Herod, having received his kingship from Rome, was eager to make it good by rebuilding it. The Temple was the symbol of Israel's special place in God's plan for the world. (Even many years after Titus had razed the Temple, the last great messianic pretender, Bar-Kochba, minted coins depicting the facade of the Temple, which no doubt he was planning to rebuild.) So when Jesus marched into the precinct of this national symbol and turned their tables over, announcing, "Take these things away. Do not make my Father's house a den of thieves!" he was acting out a parable of judgment. He stood in the reforming sandals of Jeremiah before him who had railed against Israel:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place...for if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly practice justice between a man and his neighbour, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the orphan, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, nor walk after other gods to your own ruin, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever. Will you [continue] to steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely...and walk after other gods?" (Jer. 7:3-9).²¹

Jesus' judgment on the Temple also was a clear reference to Zechariah's picture of the Messianic age when "It will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths [tabernacles]...**and there will no longer be a trader in the Temple of the Lord of hosts in that day**" (Zech. 14:16, 21).

Here is perhaps one of the clearest indications of what motivated Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem and his attack on the corrupt Temple system. Zechariah's prophecy is a prediction concerning the Messianic Kingdom. Jesus is now demonstrating the reality that the old is being done away with. This is not just an outburst of righteous anger. The Kingdom is being announced in acted out parable. It is an announcement of authority: "By what

²¹ I freely acknowledge my indebtedness to N.T. Wright for much of this material, and encourage the reader to review his chapter titled "The Mission and Message of Jesus" in *The Meaning of Jesus*.

authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (see Matt. 21:23; Mark 11:27-28; Luke 20:1-2; John 2:18). In the triumphal entry and the Temple cleansing, it is hard to imagine any other action so calculated for Jesus to announce his Messiahship so openly.

The message was that now, at Israel's supreme hour, and through himself as God's Anointed, Israel's God was showing His wrathful rejection of the whole corrupt system. This was his Father's house, the place where Israel and all the nations should be able to see the light of the one true God. But they had turned it into "a den of thieves." We have already met this word for "thieves" (*lestai*) and seen that it was regularly used to denote brigands and rebels, as well as swindlers. The Temple had become the focal point for the nationalists in their plans for revolt against Rome, as well as for the rich and powerful in their oppression of the rest of the nation. For Jesus, the distorted Temple system was a symbol that was now horribly wrong. His action in this symbolic parable of judgment was as good as saying that the Temple would be once and for all replaced. Jesus challenged, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). That is, the Messianic community would now be focused on Jesus himself. This was too much. Jesus' Kingdom aspirations were far too controversial and confronting for the nation. These were considered by the "establishment" as subversive acts. "It would be like announcing in a Muslim country that one was fulfilling the will of Allah — while apparently vilifying Muhammad and burning a copy of the Koran."²²

Jesus' healings were also highly symbolic. They are often called "signs" and so pointed to the fact that the Kingdom of God was arriving through his own work. (Healing and restoration are often joined in the Hebrew Bible, for instance in Isa. 35.) Jesus had to go. Not only had his Gospel announcement of the Kingdom of God confronted the corrupt and oppressive systems of Caesar's world, but it was a double-edged sword that cut at the corrupt heart of Judaism. At the end of his earthly ministry, the official verdict of Israel was that Jesus' claim to be their Messiah was rejected. They would not have him to reign over them as their king. "Away with him. Crucify him" was their judgment.

²² N.T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* p. 99.

However, being under the jurisprudence of Roman law, the Sanhedrin still needed Pilate's authorization before they could execute Jesus. There is no question but that Jesus was crucified by the Romans because he was recognized to be a political revolutionary. Certainly, for the most part of his ministry Jesus had hushed up this expectation. On one occasion the crowds wanted to forcibly coronate Jesus as their King Messiah, but he "withdrew again to the mountain by himself alone" (John 6:15). He said again and again to those he healed, "See that you tell no one" (Matt. 8:4). He commanded the demoniacs to "Be quiet" when they announced his true identity (Mark 1:25). He even "gave orders" to his own disciples "not to relate to anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man should rise from the dead" (Mark 9:9). Jesus knew how politically explosive it was to openly call him Messiah. Palestine was a tinder box awaiting God's Anointed King. But at the end when he came riding into Jerusalem in the most open manner with the crowds chanting the Hallel chant of Psalm 118, "Hosanna! [Save us!] Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," the die was blatantly cast. Jesus accepted the honour of being the King of Israel, long-awaited. When the Pharisees were offended and called out for Jesus to silence his admirers Jesus replied, "I tell you, if they are silent the stones will cry out" (Luke 19:40). Jesus boldly accepted the public plaudits that he was indeed their rightful leader. Trouble was, this act made him at the same time treasonous against Caesar. This much is stated by Tacitus, the Roman chronicler, and:

constitutes the one sure assertion about Jesus to issue from a non-biblical, yet contemporary, source. There is no question but that the Romans perceived Jesus as a military and political figure, and dealt with him strictly according to that perception. Crucifixion was a penalty reserved for transgressions against Roman law, and *Rome would not have bothered to crucify a man preaching a purely spiritual message, or a message of peace.*²³

Thus, if the real Jesus is to be properly interpreted, as N.T. Wright states, he must be earthed in first-century Judaism with their eschatological longing, the readiness to see in a new movement the possibility that this might be God's great, final, decisive hour with Israel and the world. "Jesus belongs within the first-century world

²³ Baigent et al, *The Messianic Legacy*, p. 73, emphasis added.

of rival eschatologies, not within the 20th-century world of ‘patterns of religion.’”²⁴ No other setting does justice to his context or position within it. As Wright follows this historical sketch, he says:

I discover a Jesus who was not simply an example, even the supreme example, of a mystic or Spirit person, such as one might meet, in principle, in other cultures. I find, rather...a first-century prophet announcing and inaugurating the kingdom of God, summoning others to join him, warning of the consequences if they did not, doing all this in symbolic actions...and in cryptic sayings, *that he believed he was Israel’s Messiah, the one through whom the true God would accomplish his decisive purpose.*²⁵

In other words, Jesus did not abandon the true and prophetic hope of Israel. He came to reconstitute Israel under his own Messiahship. He was therefore a thoroughly credible first-century flesh and blood Jew, whose Kingdom message earned the ire of his own country’s religious establishment and — under Pilate’s verdict — the wrath of Rome.

It is clear that Pilate felt a great deal of sympathy for Jesus and preferred rather to release him. Pilate announced, “I find no guilt in this man” (Luke 23:14). But the Jews, led by Caiaphas, howled for Jesus’ death: “If you release him you are not Caesar’s friend. Anyone who makes himself a king, speaks against Caesar” (John 19:12). Sherwin-White, a specialist in Roman law, sees here a convincing technicality. The term “Caesar’s friend” (*Caesaris amicus*) “recalls the frequent manipulation of the treason law for political ends in Roman public life” and is a notable political term. Caiaphas won.

But note that he has won, not on the spurious grounds of blasphemy supposedly introduced in an eleventh hour change of strategy (John 19:7); Pilate could release a blasphemer and remain Caesar’s friend. “Caiaphas has won on the grounds of Messiahship, which has been revealed in this trial...as a political issue — one that is potent enough to threaten even the Prefect of Judea.”²⁶

Although it has been hotly debated, the evidence seems to suggest that the Jews could stone men and women to death for

²⁴ N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 43.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁶ Ian Jones, *Joshua: The Man They Called Jesus*, Melbourne: Griffin Press, p. 238.

offences against *religious* law.²⁷ Adulterers could be stoned to death (John 8:7-11). The first Christian martyr, Stephen, was in fact later stoned to death (Acts 6:8-8:1). Josephus tells us that James, Jesus' brother, was stoned to death by the Sanhedrin.²⁸ These actions were obviously allowed by Rome. But where Jesus' execution is concerned, Caiaphas and the priests seek crucifixion for political treason: "We found this man perverting our nation and saying not to pay taxes to Rome and claiming that he is the Messiah, a king" (Luke 23:2). Pilate accordingly asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" As Ian Jones contemporizes it, "Pilate's question to Jesus is like a Second World War German military governor asking a citizen of an occupied country: 'Are you the leader of the Resistance?'"²⁹ "If...Jesus were a rightful king, then one [i.e. Pilate] would indeed assert one's authority by humbling him."³⁰

The Gospels are unanimous. Jesus was charged with a crime against Rome. True, the Jewish Sanhedrin wanted Jesus out of the way because of his challenge to their Temple. So they told Pilate that Jesus was a rebel king. They told the people that Jesus was a false teacher, who by claiming to be the Messiah was a blasphemer leading them astray. Thus, Jesus was led to his death in the most brutal and sadistic way possible. His crucifixion "proclaimed, within that symbolic universe, that Caesar was the master of the world and that the gods of the nations, including Israel, were powerless before him."³¹ In that day Rome, and Rome alone, was authorized to build the kingdom and rule her mini-realms. There was no separation of church and state then, no way to separate religion and politics in first-century kingdom-building. Indeed, from Caesar's viewpoint, why would anybody want to oppose the *Pax Romana*, the new world order of political reformation and spiritual rearmament, his bandit-free roads and his pirate-free sea lanes, his cities linked by common culture and economic prosperity, and his legions guarding the borders behind which the barbarians prowled?

This historical fact is often lost sight of in discussions concerning Jesus' execution. Jesus did not die because he preached "the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21), meaning God's

²⁷ Josephus, *Against Apion* 25, 31.

²⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities* 20, 9, 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

³⁰ Baigent et al, *The Messianic Legacy*, p. 45.

³¹ N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 102.

peace rules in your hearts as a spiritual reality. That message was not offensive then, and is still not offensive today. Lots of folks today talk easily about their “spiritual journey” and their life of “faith in God.” Nobody bats an eyelid. But let a true believer in the Jewish Messiah announce that Christ will yet rule the governments and nations of this world from Jerusalem, and that all powers and authorities will bow before him, and see the kind of reaction it inevitably engenders! Proclaim the Gospel’s exclusive announcement that only those who love this kind of Lord Jesus Messiah will be co-rulers with him, sharing the executive positions of that government, and conversely that those who do not work for and long for that kind of new world regime are “accursed,” and see what kind of response is evoked! Paul says, “If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed [literally *anathema*]. Maranatha [meaning, O our Lord come!]” (1 Cor. 16:22). Those who do not live for the coming Kingdom of this Lord Christ are excluded! To put this in a stark modern-day setting, let a Christian say to a Muslim, “Your prophet Mohammed will bow before King Jesus and confess that he alone is sovereign” and see the hostile response. The message of the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus has lost none of its stigma. “A Jewish-Christian theocracy is hardly what the world expects or desires.”³² Herein lies a good litmus test as to which gospel is the true Gospel: the one the modern Church is preaching today about “the Kingdom of God within you and when you die you go to heaven” or the one that announces “the Kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and he will reign forever and ever” (Rev. 10:15).

The apostolic preaching which announced Jesus’ vindication by God through resurrection must be understood in this light also. Forgiveness was preached not just in today’s terms of personal guilt expunged with relief for a guilty conscience. Rather:

it was the early Christian deduction, from Jesus’ resurrection, that his death had been after all effective, *as the hinge upon which the door to God’s new world had swung open. To say that the Messiah had died for sins in fulfilment of the scriptures was to make a claim, not so much about an abstract atonement theology into which*

³² Anthony Buzzard, *Our Fathers Who Aren't in Heaven*, Restoration Fellowship, 1995, p. 122.

*individuals could tap to salve their guilty consciences, as about where Israel and the world now were within God's eschatological timetable.*³³

Early Christianity continued Jesus' Messianic ministry after Easter. That is to say, the message of the early Church was to continue Jesus' announcement of the Gospel of the Kingdom. This message still offended the existing lords of the world, most notably Caesar. The early Christians, after Jesus' resurrection, rebuilt their agendas and aims on the understanding that God's promises had not failed, and that when the cord had pulled back the curtain revealing God's future Kingdom they had seen a vision worth dying for. God had raised this very Jesus and vindicated his Messianic claims. Therefore, Jesus' message of the Kingdom was not dead and buried. The king was indeed going to come back from heaven to complete his Father's agenda.

In an earlier chapter we noted that the emperor Constantine, three centuries after Jesus, saw himself as the saviour and unifier of the Roman Empire. He endeavoured to combine in his kingship the messianic ideals of military and spiritual rulership. By aligning itself with Constantine, the Church compromised its independence and sold its soul to secularism, thereby denying the very Christ it believed in. The Jesus of history was effectively buried. The Church no longer proclaimed the coming apocalyptic Kingdom of Christ as Gospel, and corrupted the message about the coming Kingdom that Jesus and the apostles had preached with a new "gospel" message: "The kingdom has arrived. That kingdom is the Church." All traces of Messianic Christianity were transformed, and to all intents and purposes erased:

In order to diffuse itself through the Romanized world, Christianity transmuted itself — and, in the process, *rewrote the historical circumstances* from which it arose. It would not do to deify a rebel against Rome. It would not do to exalt a figure who had been executed by the Romans for crimes against the Empire. As a result, responsibility for Jesus' death was transferred to the Jews — not only to the Sadducee establishment, who undoubtedly had a hand in it, but to the people of the Holy Land in general, who were among Jesus' most fervent supporters. And *Jesus himself*

³³ N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 103, emphasis added.

*had to be divorced from his historical context, turned into a non-political figure — an other-worldly, spiritual Messiah who posed no challenge whatever to Caesar. Thus, all trace of Jesus' political activity was de-emphasized, diluted or excised. And, so far as possible, all trace of his Jewishness was deliberately obscured, ignored or rendered irrelevant.*³⁴

The Roman Church of the middle ages was fiercely anti-Semitic. They hated the “Christ killers” and sought to destroy anything Jewish. We only have to remember the pressure that was applied to Mel Gibson to edit (delete!) certain scenes that were considered offensive by the Jews in his blockbuster film *The Passion of the Christ* to understand the deeply ingrained residual feelings this issue still raises. The Jews suffered horribly from anti-Semitic views promoted by the Church, post-Constantine. The Church came to be presented as a Gentile organization that was supposedly not foreseen in the OT. The Church era was the “mystery” now come to light. However, the NT does not tell Jews that they must become Gentile Christians to be saved. Rather, Gentiles are told to become believers in the (Jewish) Messiah. It is we Gentiles who were once “separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). It is Gentile believers who are included or “grafted” into the blessings of Israel. It is a Jewish Messiah we love and serve. But the Church has taught that if a Jew wants to become a Christian he has to forsake his prophetic Hebrew heritage. This is wrong.

It will be argued of course that Jesus' political agenda (political in the sense of proclaiming a Gospel that promised the literal reign of God through Messiah on a renewed earth over the nations) was wrongly perceived by his contemporaries. After all, did he not say to Pilate whilst on trial, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then my servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, my kingdom is not of this realm” (John 18:36). The argument which dismisses the political nature of Jesus' message of the Kingdom will be shortly examined. It will suffice for the moment to observe that the only thing Jesus denied here was that his time for coronation had come. Jesus did not deny that he was the King of the Jews. He did

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107, emphasis added.

not deny his God-given right to the throne of David and to inherit all the promises God had decreed involving governmental control of the (future) world. All Jesus said to Pilate was that his kingdom did not belong to this present system, did not arise out of the present wicked order dominated by Satanic values. Anybody who doubts that Jesus was waiting for his government to come need only see how his assertions to this effect so inflamed his jurors. Under oath Jesus said to the high priest, “hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven” (Matt. 26:64). Incensed, the high priest tore his tunic, saying with indignation, “He has blasphemed!”

The Mystery of the Kingdom

What was it that so offended the Jews and caused them to reject Jesus’ claim to be their King and the fulfilment of all God’s promises? The blasphemy was *not* that Jesus was claiming to be Almighty God in human flesh. That is an incongruous charge and makes no sense in the historical and biblical context of the time. That idea is an imported, foreign, later invention. As Schonfield rightly states:

By admitting that he was the Messiah, the rightful and foreordained king of Israel, Jesus had committed a “blasphemy,” not of God in Jewish law but of Tiberias Caesar in Roman law. He was guilty, they held, of *laesa maiestas*, violation of the emperor’s sovereignty, and it was therefore proper for the scandalised authorities, not as Jews but as Roman subjects, to act as *delatores* and inform against Jesus to Caesar’s representative. Because a Jewish court reached this verdict, we are not to imagine, as the Church was later concerned to establish, that Jesus had declared his Deity, and consequently from the viewpoint of the Mosaic Law had blasphemed the name of the Lord. In that case the penalty would have been stoning, not crucifixion. Jesus had not even uttered the sacred Name of God, and referred to himself as the Son of Man. Early Nazorean teaching knew nothing of Trinitarianism. The Council had neither cause nor any interest to condemn Jesus on religious grounds, since their whole purpose was to stand well with Rome and at the same time to divert the odium of

the Jewish people for what they were doing from themselves to Pontius Pilate.³⁵

Yes. The scandal was that Jesus was claiming to be God's anointed, the Messiah, the rightful heir to David's throne of Israel. But Jesus did not fit the divine-hero mould the Jews had come to expect. Nor were evil doers conquered. All things appeared to continue on as they had always done. Theirs was the picture of a Messiah coming — immediately, in their own day — to take “dominion, glory and a kingdom, so that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away, and his Kingdom is one which will not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:14). Even the disciples were offended that the Messiah should be ignominiously killed (Matt. 16:21-23). A suffering Messiah had no place in the disciples' plans, nor in the estimation of the nation of Israel. The Kingdom Jesus announced did not look like what they expected. George Ladd suggests the answer to the scandal of Jesus is found in the concept of this “mystery.” Jesus said to his disciples, “To you has been given **the mystery of the kingdom of God**, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; otherwise they might turn again, and be forgiven” (Mark 4:11-12).

That Jesus believed the Kingdom was to come with apocalyptic power is quite certain. As the Messiah he would come “at the end of the age” with the angels of God and raise the dead. He would come with a blazing light universally witnessed from one end of the sky to the other (Luke 17:24). After a brief and intense period of great tribulation, the sun would be darkened, the moon would turn blood-red, and the stars would fall (Mark 13:24-25; Matt. 24:21, 29-31). There would be a cataclysmic “crunch.” He would come with such power that there would be “weeping and gnashing of teeth” from all the wicked who would be cast out of his Kingdom. Yes, he believed the prophets.

But the mystery so unexpected to Jesus' contemporaries was that the Kingdom that is to come in such cosmic upheaval has in fact entered the world in advance in a hidden form, and is already at work secretly within and among men. The mystery of the Kingdom is the coming of the Kingdom into history in advance of its

³⁵ Schonfield, *The Passover Plot*, p. 170.

apocalyptic manifestation. It is, in short, “fulfilment without [present] consummation.” There is a now, yet not now, aspect to the Kingdom. There is a tension between the already present, and expected future. The NT must be read with both this present and future aspect of the Kingdom held in tension.

There is “*both* a present preliminary manifestation of the spirit and power of the Kingdom as well as its future worldwide inauguration and establishment at the Second Coming.”³⁶ This is the single truth illustrated by the several parables of Mark 4 and Matthew 13.³⁷ An illustration or two of this is in order. Take the parable of the mustard seed: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds; but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches” (Matt. 13:31-32).

The Jews were familiar with the picture of Israel as a great tree (see Ps. 104:12; Ezek. 17:23; 31:6). They fully expected, under Messiah, to be the grandest and biggest tree of all the nations. So how could this insignificant Galilean be the Messiah? And his band of half-literate disciples, how could they represent the Kingdom of Heaven? The Jews could not understand how one could talk about the Kingdom apart from such an all-encompassing manifestation of God’s rule. “How could the coming glorious Kingdom have anything to do with the poor little band of Jesus’ disciples? Rejected by the religious leaders, welcomed by tax collectors and sinners, Jesus looked more like a deluded dreamer than the bearer of the Kingdom of God.”³⁸ Jesus’ answer is first, the tiny seed, later at the end, the huge tree. The smallness of his present ministry does not exclude the future glorious invasion of the Kingdom of God. The parable of the mustard seed illustrates the truth that the Kingdom, which one day will be a great tree, is already present in the world in the person of Jesus and his followers, even if currently, according to the world’s standards, an insignificant form.

It is true that many commentators see in this parable a forecast of the growth of the Church into a great institution — the so-called Kingdom-Church. This interpretation, however, has the weakness of

³⁶ Anthony Buzzard, *The Coming Kingdom of the Messiah*, Restoration Fellowship, 2002, p. 28.

³⁷ G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 94.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

not giving proper recognition to the historical setting of the parable. It rips Jesus out of his social setting and the context of Israel's faith. In short, it has no exegetical ground whatsoever. That the Church is not the Kingdom is clear when we remember that it is the Church's task to preach the Kingdom. Through her message of the Gospel of the Kingdom it will be decided who will enter the Kingdom at the end of this age, and who will be excluded. The Church does not preach itself! "*The Church is the people of the Kingdom but cannot be identified with the Kingdom.*"³⁹ Therefore, "This interpretation is based on the identification of the Kingdom and the Church, a view that we hold to be untenable."⁴⁰

The parable of the leaven presents the same truth as the mustard seed. That is, that the Kingdom of God, which one day will rule over all nations on the earth, has already — in the preaching of Jesus — entered the world in a form that was hardly perceptible to the Jews (and the rest): "He spoke another parable to them: 'The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three pecks of meal, until it was all leavened'" (Matt. 13:33).

Many commentators have seen here again the idea that through a slow permeating process the Church will eventually penetrate all society and thus the world will be transformed. Other commentators interpret the leaven as evil doctrine that has permeated an apostate Church. However, these ideas were foreign to Jesus' mind and to the Jewish context in which he taught. The interpretation that best fits the historical setting in which Jesus' ministry worked is that the leaven represents the Kingdom now hidden, which one day will control all.

This parable gains its significance only when interpreted in the life setting of Jesus' ministry. The mighty, irresistible character of the eschatological Kingdom was understood by all Jews. The coming of the Kingdom would mean a complete change in the order of things. The present evil order of the world and of society would be utterly displaced by the Kingdom of God. The problem was that Jesus' ministry initiated no such transformation. He preached the presence of the Kingdom of God, but the world went on as before. How then could this be the Kingdom?

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58, emphasis added.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Jesus' reply is that when a bit of leaven is put in a mass of dough, nothing seems to happen. In fact, the leaven seems quite engulfed by the dough. Eventually something does happen, and the result is the complete transformation of the dough. No emphasis is to be placed upon the way the transformation is accomplished. The idea of the Kingdom of God conquering the world by a gradual permeation and inner transformation was utterly foreign to Jewish thought. The idea of gradualness is contradicted by the parables of the tares and the dragnet where the Kingdom comes by apocalyptic judgment and destruction of evil rather than by a gradual transformation of the world.

The emphasis of the parable lies in the contrast between the final, complete victory of the Kingdom when the new order comes, and the present, hidden form of that Kingdom as it has now come into the world. One would never guess that Jesus and his small band of disciples had anything to do with the future, glorious Kingdom of God. This is the mystery, the new truth about the Kingdom. How or when the future Kingdom will come is no part of the parable.⁴¹

Jesus used many other parables to illustrate this hidden mystery of the Kingdom of God. The parables of the pearl of great price and the treasure hidden in a field (Matt. 13:44-46), the dragnet (Matt. 13:47-50), and the man sowing the seed (Mark 4:26-29) all illustrate the point that in Jesus the Christ the Kingdom had come among men in an unexpected way. Jews everywhere longed for the Kingdom of God to be fully manifested. But it had come in a form that they did not recognize, so they overlooked and even despised it, rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus just did not fit the expected historical, religious and political moulds of the day. As another has observed:

Jesus was neither a man of the religious and political establishment (a priest or a theologian like the Sadducees) nor a man of the violent political revolution (a political liberator like the Zealots). He was neither a man who joined the apolitical emigration (he was not a monk like the Qumran people) nor a man of religious legal compromise (he was not a pious observer of the law like the Pharisees). This distinctive profile of Jesus, his otherness in comparison

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

to other politically relevant groups, was the first reason for the conflict over Jesus. Jesus was different!⁴²

It was the difference in Jesus and the motley band of followers he attracted and his sayings that was so puzzling to what we would in our society call the “conservative middle class majority.” How could he be the King of Israel? How could he announce that the Kingdom is “at hand”? How could one who broke the Sabbath and the rules of purity and who mixed with the wrong company — prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers — be their promised King? Jesus welcomed “sinners,” lepers, the unclean, the blind, the lame, the deaf, the mute, prostitutes, and tax collectors. Sure, he claimed to fulfill all the old hopes and ideals of Israel, but he did it in a way that appeared to cut across all conventions with a totally new agenda. In that society, such outcasts were excluded from the Messianic hope. But:

Contrary to every superficial evaluation, discipleship to Jesus means participation in the Kingdom of God. Present in the person and work of Jesus without outward display or visible glory was the Kingdom of God itself...Historically the parable[s] answer the question of the strange character of Jesus’ followers. He attracted tax collectors and sinners. In the popular expectation, the coming of the Kingdom would mean not only that the Messiah would “destroy the godless nations with the words of his mouth...and...reprove sinners for the thoughts of their hearts”; he would also “gather together a holy people whom he shall lead in righteousness”...Jesus did not gather such a holy people. On the contrary he said, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17)...How could the Kingdom of God have anything to do with such a strange fellowship? Is not the function of the Kingdom by definition to destroy all sinners and to create a sinless community? Jesus’ answer is that one day the Kingdom will indeed create such a perfect community. But before this end-time event, an unexpected manifestation of God’s Kingdom has occurred.⁴³

This is the same line of thinking that still causes Jews to this day to reject Jesus as the Messiah. Jews today reason that since the

⁴² Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* p. 461.

⁴³ G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 100-101.

Hebrew prophets predict a Messiah who will conquer evil governments, and since Jesus did not overthrow the Roman Empire in Palestine or bring the Kingdom of God, Jesus was deluded and his disciples were deceived into believing he was the promised Messiah. Therefore (modern-day Jews still argue), the New Testament is a false document.

So Jews past and present have failed to understand that the Kingdom of God involves two great moments: fulfilment in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and climax at the end of the age, introducing a new era of history, when the Messiah returns in glory. If the matter stopped there, it would be sad enough. But alas, even Christians have lost faith in the central message of Jesus and the apostles, namely the Gospel of the Kingdom. Ask yourself, When you hear the Gospel proclaimed today do you hear anything concerning the Kingdom of God? Or are you invited simply to “ask Jesus into your heart”?

We have replaced the robust end-of-the-age emphasis with heaven-for-disembodied-souls-when-we-die stuff. (To many the idea of being a disembodied soul in heaven suggests eternal boredom. One of my workmates recently told me he *wants* to go to hell where the real party is going to be.) We have turned God’s master plan for the redemption of the world and society into a pathetic subjective caricature. No Hebrew grounded in his Bible would have entertained such a nebulous concept. Where does this form of the Gospel invitation appear in the New Testament? On the contrary, as Anthony Buzzard so powerfully states:

The Gospel as Jesus preached it invites you also to dedicate the rest of your life to preparation for participation in the supervision of that future Kingdom on a renewed earth. You are invited to be a co-heir of the Kingdom with the Messiah. In short, the Jesus of history, the original “theocrat,” continues his work of recruiting members of his royal household, the theocratic party, who are urged to prepare themselves with divine help to take part in the Messiah’s government of the future. This will be the first and only administration to rule the world successfully.⁴⁴

Sadly, we do not hear this eschatological emphasis today. There is an antipathy to the Gospel of the Kingdom as Jesus preached it. It

⁴⁴ Anthony Buzzard, *The Coming Kingdom of the Messiah*, p. 7.

was not always so. “For Christians of the first three centuries, the Kingdom was altogether eschatological. An early second-century prayer says, ‘Remember, Lord, Thy church, to...gather it together in its holiness from the four winds to Thy kingdom which Thou hast prepared for it.’”⁴⁵

How has this shift away from the Gospel of the Kingdom happened? The reasoning is this: Since Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, and since he did not destroy Roman rule in Palestine and bring in an age of glory for Israel, setting up the earthly Kingdom of God, Jesus obviously did not intend such a literal meaning of his Gospel teaching. Such political and earthly interpretations are way too literalistic. They are misguided Jewish ideals. What Jesus really came to bring was a “spiritual” kingdom, that is, a kingdom of God’s rule and sovereignty within men’s *hearts*. Did he not say, “The kingdom is within [or, among] you” (Luke 17:21)? It was Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) who popularized this position.

Part of this misunderstanding comes from the very phrase “Kingdom of Heaven.” To Western ears “heaven” is away out there in ethereal space, beyond human perception. To modern ears “heaven” is where we go when we die. To our minds “heaven” is mystical. But not to the Hebrew mind. “In contrast, the biblical heaven is a metaphor signifying God’s promised future, the age to come, the Kingdom of God (which is also called ‘the Kingdom of Heaven’). What better metaphor to picture the promised future of God than the heavens, the sky above, to which it is natural to look when envisioning the future?”⁴⁶ That is to say, what exists “in heaven” to the Hebrew exists in God’s promised future. Heaven, then, is a Hebrew figure of speech synonymous with the coming life of the age to come which will arrive on earth when Jesus Christ returns in kingly glory to set up God’s reign over the world, according to all the promises of God.

Heaven does, then, represent the everlasting home where God and His people will enjoy unending fellowship, but rather than an invisible home in the sky to which they *go* when they die, it is a visible home which will *come* out of the sky — that is, out of the future, so to speak, at the

⁴⁵ G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 105.

⁴⁶ R. Hach, *Possession and Persuasion*, p. 138.

second coming of the Messiah to renew the earth; it is the coming Kingdom of God.⁴⁷

The only way I can internalize this hope and make it a present spiritual possession (saying that “Jesus lives and reigns in my heart now”) is to understand that by committing myself to this Gospel of the coming Kingdom, I am identifying myself and all of my future dreams and aspirations with this promised future of world renewal when Jesus Christ comes back to earth. It is not just by praying parrot-fashion, “Your Kingdom come.” It is by “repenting and believing the Gospel” about the Kingdom. It is by adopting the Kingdom values of love and non-violence that Jesus espoused. Jesus is the prototype of the New Man that God will bring into that coming age. Jesus rejected all worldly approaches of domination and intimidation over others. He came to serve. He will share his Kingdom with those who live in this day and age with these, his values. Jesus “lives in my heart” only when I am so persuaded by this Gospel of the coming Kingdom that his word is the motivation force in my daily living: “And everyone who has this hope fixed on him purifies himself, just as he is pure” (1 John 3:3).

I remember sitting in a church service once, when the person leading the communion service, the Lord’s Supper (in Churches of Christ circles we call this person “the president” because he/she presides over the table), invited anybody from the congregation to share publicly what communion meant to them. One stood up to say it meant his sins were forgiven by the blood of Jesus. Another stood up to say it meant he could renew closeness with God for the week to come. Still another stood up and shared that by eating the bread and drinking the cup he felt he belonged to the body of Christ. Probably eight individuals testified along these personal lines. It was significant that not one person shared that it meant to them what it did to Jesus. For it was in the shadow of the cross, as he instituted the Lord’s Supper, that Jesus told his followers:

“I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” And having taken the cup...he said, “Take this and share it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes” (Luke 22:15-18).

For Jesus, eating the bread and drinking the cup with his followers meant a promise. It meant he would eat and drink with them in the coming Kingdom of God: “Just as my Father has covenanted to give me a kingdom, I grant you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:29-30). Jesus firmly believed that sitting around that table would be the resurrected patriarchs of Israel, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, along with “many from the east and west” (Matt. 8:11). The apostle Paul also said to the church that “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death **until he comes**” (1 Cor. 11:26). It was this hope of the promised future of the Age to Come that was the prime and unifying force in Jesus’ own life and faith. Only when it becomes ours can we truly say “the kingdom is within you.”

The Gospel Jesus preached concerned firstly this future Kingdom of God. Jesus equated “the Kingdom of God” with “the age to come, eternal life.” He said to the disciples, “Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of **the kingdom of God**, who shall not receive many times as much at this time and in **the age to come**, eternal life” (Luke 18:29-30).

Jesus said that being “born again” — modern evangelicalism’s great catch-cry — is the necessary condition for entering the Kingdom when it comes: “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again [or, born from above], he cannot **see the kingdom of God**’” (John 3:3).

Then note how he changes the phrase slightly: “Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot **enter into the kingdom of God**’” (John 3:5).

Just a few verses further on, the Lord Jesus explains what it is to “see” or to “enter” the kingdom of God. He says that to believe in him will be to “**have eternal life**” (literally, life in the Age to Come, John 3:15, 16).

The disciples also equated “salvation” with “entering the kingdom of God.” When Jesus tells them that it is hard for a rich man to enter **the kingdom of God**, and that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter **the**

Kingdom of God, they ask in astonishment, “Then who can be saved?” (Matt. 19:24-25).

Putting all this together, we get the equation:

The Kingdom of God = the life of the age to come = eternal life = salvation

It is a remarkable fact, then, that Jesus’ disciples preached this Gospel of the Kingdom long before they understood that Jesus was to be crucified and raised again. One day Jesus took the twelve aside and said to them:

Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things which are written through the prophets about the son of man will be accomplished. For he will be delivered up to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and mistreated and spit upon, and after they have scourged him, they will kill him; and the third day he will rise again. And they understood none of these things, and this saying was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said (Luke 18:31-34).

Four times at least after Peter had confessed Jesus as the Christ at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus predicted that he would be killed and rise again, though the disciples on each occasion were unable to make sense of it (Mark 8:31, cp. v. 34-37; 9:9, 31; 10:33-34). I repeat: *The disciples were preaching the Gospel of salvation, the Gospel of the Kingdom, the Gospel of eternal life, before they had any comprehension of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus!*

Clearly the Kingdom of God was the *first* item on the agenda in apostolic presentations of the Gospel. This is hardly surprising, since Jesus had always proclaimed the Gospel of the Kingdom — and this was long before anything was said about his death for our sins, which the disciples did not understand! (Luke 18:31-34). It is immensely instructive to note that the subject matter of the Kingdom cannot originally have included the death and resurrection of Jesus.⁴⁸

It is true that only on the basis of the finished work of Christ on the cross and his resurrection that we may enter the coming Kingdom of God. But not for one moment did Jesus abandon the earthly hope he inherited from his Hebrew heritage. It was just that

⁴⁸ Anthony Buzzard, *The Coming Kingdom of the Messiah*, p. 72.

he knew the Messianic Kingdom would not come the first time round. He must die first and be raised again to open the way for us. There would be no harvest unless the grain of wheat first falls into the ground and dies (John 12:24). His whole energy and focus was in preparing his followers for this great universal event. The foundational fact is that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah destined not only to die for our sins, but also to rule this world in a future commonwealth to be set up at his Second Coming. Any theology that does not live and breathe in this atmosphere has lost touch with the Jesus of the Bible. It is in this background that we now delve a bit deeper.

The Promises to the Fathers

Few readers of the Bible today seem to realize that the Gospel has to do with the fulfilling of certain oath-bound promises that God made to Abraham and later expanded to David. The rubric over the NT is Matthew 1:1: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." The conclusion of the NT is the confession of the risen Jesus: "I am the root and the offspring of David" (Rev. 22:16). Everything between these "book-ends" is concerned to show how Jesus meets the criteria of "the son of David." These promises "to the fathers" form the basis of Jesus' whole Kingdom ministry and Gospel message. We may summarize the story of these foundational promises this way: God promised Eve that one of her descendants would reverse the curse that entered the world in Eden. That descendant — later delineated as the Messiah — would arise from the family of Abraham, and he will gain possession of the land of Palestine and the world forever. Abraham himself, even though he dies in the meantime, is told he will also enjoy this promised inheritance forever. An everlasting inheritance, however, can only make sense if Abraham will be brought back to life. Here are the first hints that in God's scheme there is going to be a resurrection from the dead.

In the meantime, generations from Abraham's line of descendants come and go. Even though this people called Israel enter the Promised Land under Joshua, the promise to Abraham is not yet fulfilled. Abraham is still asleep in the dust of the earth. But the promise has not failed. In fact, God further clarifies that this promised descendant of Abraham is going to be a mighty king, also descended from David (2 Sam. 7:12-16). So the promise gains

specificity and is magnified. The King and his Kingdom become the hope of every true son of Abraham. “On these mighty themes of permanent security, monarchy and territory, the whole structure of the biblical story rests. The Message, it should be carefully noted, is never merely ‘religious.’ It is both national and universal — and related to the future of the earth.”⁴⁹ *It is these OT promises to Abraham of land and throne that form the very basis of Jesus’ announcement of the Gospel of the Kingdom!* If I may once again borrow one of Anthony Buzzard’s statements, “It would be no exaggeration to say that failure to grasp the terms of God’s arrangements with Abraham is the root of the massive confusion now existing in the minds of churchgoers in regard to the whole purpose of the Christian faith.”⁵⁰

The apostles announced that they preached “**the good news of the promise made to the fathers**” (Acts 13:32). Time and again the NT declares a connection between the mission of Christ and the promises God made through the prophets of old: “For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God **to confirm the promises given to the fathers**” (Rom. 15:8).

Somehow God’s honour, “the truth of God,” is tied in with the need for Christ to fulfill “the promises given to the fathers.” Whatever these promises are, they evidently have to do with the Jews, for earlier Paul states: “My kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and **the promises**” (Rom. 9:3-4). Even more definitely Paul says, “**Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed.** He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as referring to many, but rather to one, ‘And to your seed,’ that is, Christ...and if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring [literally, ‘seed’], heirs according to **promise**” (Gal. 3:16, 29).

Evidently, if we would know what promises Paul has in mind, we must refer to the history of Abraham, for this is where he derived his information. Most of us are familiar with the outline of the story of Abraham. We know God called him to leave his home in Chaldea and become a tent-dweller, a “pilgrim” in the land of

⁴⁹ Anthony Buzzard, *Our Fathers Who Aren't in Heaven*, p. 26.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Canaan. We know that God promised Abraham that one day the Saviour of the world would come from his line and that through the preaching of the Gospel all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him. But that there is any more relevance to the promise made to Abraham quite escapes us. After all, “father Abraham” is significant and applicable to the past history of the Jews, but what relevance do the promises made to him over 3,000 years ago have for the Christian today?

This dismissive attitude is a sad reflection on how far modern Christianity has strayed from the very essence of the NT Gospel. There are a number of old Sunday school songs and hymns which talk about crossing the River Jordan when we die and go up to heaven: “Where is now the prophet Daniel? Safe in the Promised Land.” The idea that the Promised Land is heaven, and that all the faithful dead, including Abraham, Daniel and the “fathers,” are already in the glory, is widespread. Such modern sentiments give the impression that for most, the promises made to the fathers have already come to pass and therefore have no current relevance. But this is a far cry from the teaching of the NT which views the promises made to the fathers as both the basis of the saving Gospel and *still awaiting* a future fulfilment. After Pentecost Stephen said Abraham had not yet inherited Canaan. To that day God had given Abraham “no inheritance” in “this country in which you [Jews] are now living...not even a foot of ground” (Acts 7:4-5). Stephen believed God’s promise to Abraham was *still waiting* to be fulfilled.

We have already had occasion to note Hebrews 11: “All these [fathers] died in faith, **without receiving the promises**, but having seen them and having **welcomed them from a distance**, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own” (v. 13-14).

So Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Daniel and the prophets died without receiving what God had promised them: a country of their own! The fathers are not yet safe in the Promised Land. This sentiment is repeated towards the end of Hebrews 11: “And all these, having gained approval through their faith, **did not receive what was promised**, because God had provided something better for us, **so that apart from us [NT Christians] they should not be made perfect**” (v. 39-40).

So at the time of the writing of the NT the promises God had made to Abraham and the fathers of Israel were still not fulfilled. Evidently, Christians also have a stake in these promises made to the fathers. We are “heirs of the promise”; we are Abraham’s descendants because we have faith in the same God who made the promises (Gal. 3:16, 29). When on trial for his faith, the apostle Paul testified that the salvation offered through Christ was a fulfilment of the promises made to the fathers: “And now I am standing trial for **the hope of the promise made by God to the fathers; the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain**” (Acts 26:6-7).

This faith was in the good Hebrew tradition as expressed by many. Mary the mother of Jesus also understood that Jesus was to fulfill the promises made to the fathers of Israel: “He has given help to Israel His servant, in remembrance of His mercy, **as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever**” (Luke 1:54-55).

The father of John the Baptist also praised God for remembering His promises to Abraham and to David:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant — **as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old** — salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show mercy toward our fathers, and **to remember His holy covenant, the oath which He swore to Abraham our father** (Luke 1:68-73).

The fact that Christ Jesus has been raised from the dead and is now in heaven awaiting his Second Coming is, according to Peter, proof that the promises to the fathers are still waiting for a future fulfilment. Peter commands his hearers to repent and believe so that God “may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive **until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time**” (Acts 3:20-21).

These verses show that the promises made to the fathers were still unfulfilled even as late as the first century AD, still unfulfilled after Christ’s ascension into heaven, still unfulfilled thousands of years after God had originally spoken them, still unfulfilled after the NT church had been started, still unfulfilled at the writing of the

NT! We are now in a position to ask what the promises to the fathers involve and why are these promises the key to unlocking the meaning of the whole Gospel that Jesus himself preached?

When God told Abraham to leave his home country and his family ties behind him, He promised to lead him “to **the land** which I will show you, and I will make you **a great nation**...and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:2-3). The two central planks to God’s promise to Abraham were to give him the Promised Land and to make of his descendants a mighty nation. This promise was repeated again and again:

And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all **the land which you see**, I will give it **to you** and to your descendants forever. And **I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth**; so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered. Arise, **walk about the land** through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you” (Gen. 13:14-17).

The careful reader will note that the land of Canaan is promised to Abraham himself, in person, as well as to his descendants. The text states, “I will give it **to you**.” Furthermore, observe that God did *not* say to Abraham, “I will give the land to you *through* your descendants forever.” Rather God promised, “I will give the land to you **and** to your descendants.” Clearly this promise is yet to come to pass. It must be central to God’s plan for this world, for God reiterates the same two essential elements to His promise: the Promised Land to Abraham and loads of descendants to fill that country (see also Gen. 12:7; 15:8-18; 17:8). God ties His honour and His word to this Abrahamic covenant time and again with the divine “I will.” Again, after Abraham had not withheld his only son Isaac from sacrifice, God underscores the promise further:

“By Myself I have sworn,” declares the LORD, “because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed [descendants] as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. And in your

seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice” (Gen. 22:16-18).

Isaac and Jacob are called “fellow-heirs of the same promise” (Heb. 11:9). To them the promise of the land and many descendants was repeated: “And the LORD appeared to him [Isaac] and said, ‘Sojourn in **this land** and I will be with you and bless you, for **to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands**, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham’” (Gen. 26:2-4).

And may God Almighty bless you [Jacob] and...give you the blessing of Abraham...that you may possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham...I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it **to you** and to your descendants. Your descendants shall also be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed (Gen. 28:3-4, 13-14).

We have already noted that Jesus took these promises quite literally, for he believed that the individuals Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would be personally raised up by God to live in the Promised Land in the Messianic age to come (Matt. 22:23-33). This is why Jesus argued for the resurrection of the dead: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had died without having received God’s promise to them, and it was impossible that God’s word should fail of fulfilment.

1. A Great and Mighty Nation

No wonder the Hebrews were passionate about “the promises to the fathers.” Two key elements stand out. First, Abraham’s descendants would become a mighty nation through whom the earth would be blessed. Unfortunately, the Jews rejected God’s prophets all the way through and proved unworthy of this high privilege and destiny. Ultimately, they even killed the Son of God, Jesus the Christ. Natural Israel, “Israel according to the flesh,” was “broken off” from the stem and root. And so the Gentiles who accept that Jesus is the Messiah and believe his Gospel of the Kingdom are “grafted” into the olive tree and so become a part of the true Israel of God, that is, those who believe the promises (see Rom. 11). The great nation that numbers more than the stars of heaven that was

promised to Abraham, now consists of people from every race, whether Jew or Gentile, who by their faith in God's Christ show that they are of the same faith as Abraham. For:

It is not as though the word of God [His promise of the Kingdom] has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham's [physical] descendants, but: "Through Isaac your descendants will be named." That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants (Rom. 9:6-8).

The Gospel NT Christians are to believe is the *same* Gospel Abraham believed. It is "the Gospel of the Kingdom" that Jesus himself believed in. We are to be true to the faith of Jesus. In Romans 3 Paul says that God will justify the believer "who has faith in Jesus" (v. 26). However, as the NASB translation in the margin correctly says, this phrase literally rendered is that God will justify the one "who is **of** the faith of Jesus." We are to have the faith of Jesus, the faith he lived by. There can be no faith *in* Jesus if we do not have the faith *of* Jesus, the faith he lived by, the faith he modelled, the faith he taught. This phrase is found in the next chapter where Paul speaks of "the faith of Abraham" (Rom. 4:16). It is the same Greek construction. There is no reason (other than theological necessity!) to translate one instance as "the faith **of** Abraham" and the other as "faith **in** Jesus." Jesus had Abraham's faith, that is, faith in the same promises of God.

This phrase, "the faith **of** Jesus," is often obscured in our English Bibles, even though this is how the Greek text states it. Romans 3:22 is translated: "the righteousness of God through faith **in** Jesus Christ [is] for all those who believe." However, there is no preposition before the words "Jesus Christ," and the latter phrase is in the genitive case. It is more accurately translated: "the righteousness of God through faith **of** Jesus Christ" (which is how the KJV translates it). The same holds true in Philippians 3:9. Here Paul is willing to count all things as "rubbish" if only he may have a right relationship with God through Jesus, "not having a righteousness of my own derived from law, but that which is through faith **in** Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith." Again, there is no preposition here, and "Christ" is in the genitive case, which the KJV more naturally translates as

“that which is through the faith **of** Christ.” The same applies in Galatians 2, where we read, “knowing that a man is not justified by works of law, but through faith **in** Christ Jesus, we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith **in** Christ, and not by works of law” (v. 16). It really reads, “a man is justified through faith **of** Messiah.” Just a couple of verses later Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith **in** the Son of God, who loved me and delivered himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20). Again we have a “subjective genitive,” so the accurate translation is “the faith **of** the Son of God.”

The practical implication is significant. What is the faith that brings righteousness before God the Father? It is the faith *of* Messiah Jesus. What faith did Jesus live by? Faith in his Father’s promise given to Abraham (and confirmed in the Davidic oath), that God would raise the righteous dead and bring them into a Kingdom of glory through His Anointed King. That is, faith in the promised announcement of the eschatological Kingdom. This is the “faith **of** Jesus.” What is the steadfastness of the true believer, but to “keep the commandments” of God and to keep “**the faith of Jesus**” (Rev. 14:12). There is no way to have faith in Jesus except to believe what Jesus believed. To believe in Jesus is to believe his word or Gospel announcement. All of which is to say, *the only way to express true faith in Jesus the Christ is to live according to the faith he walked by and was motivated by.* Jesus’ faith in God’s word of promise becomes our faith in the *same* Gospel-promise. Paul’s Gospel was his preaching of the faith of Jesus, Jesus’ Gospel announcement of the Kingdom of God explained in light of the facts of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The only way to be righteous before the Father is to honour the faith of His Son, i.e. to believe the Good News of the coming Kingdom of God he believed in. This is to believe *in* Jesus. This is to be *of* Abraham’s faith, to be a true son/daughter of God. It is to have the faith of Abraham which Paul recommended.

The true descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the ones who please God by believing His word of the promise. The flesh and blood descendants of Abraham, the Jews, to this day mostly do not show that they are of Abraham’s faith, for they reject the Messiah that Abraham looked forward to. It was Jesus’ complaint that although “Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it and was glad,” his contemporaries did not (John 8:56). The promised

race of Abraham's descendants today comes from the rest of the world. God is "taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name" (Acts 15:14). The NT mystery "which in other generations was not made known...as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit...[is] that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs, and fellow-members of the body, and **fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel**" (Eph. 3:3-6). Those "who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham" are the inheritors of the promises made (Rom. 4:12). Today then, the promise comes through faith by grace (and not according to the old Law) "in order that **the promise** may be certain to all the descendants...who are **of** the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all" (Rom. 4:16). When a new believer is baptized into Christ he/she becomes "Abraham's offspring, [an] heir according to promise" (Gal. 3:29). Christ's mission was to redeem not "the nation [of Israel] only, but that he might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:52).

Speaking of the future day when this great company will be gathered together, Jesus promised, "And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west, and recline at table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11).

When Christ returns to earth Abraham will in his resurrection body see the literal fulfilment of the promise God made to him long ago. He will see his offspring in number as the stars of heaven or the dust of the earth. The dead of all the generations who are of his faith will be in that Kingdom. "Behold! A great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and people and tongues" (Rev. 7:9). Abraham's royal descendants will at last inherit the promised Kingdom of God.

That Jesus will be the king of this Kingdom is also a key part of this promise. For the promise God made to Abraham received further refinement when God prophesied to David that one of his descendants would sit on his throne forever. David would have a royal heir so that his dynasty would never end. That Jesus is the promised heir to the Davidic throne is clear. The angel Gabriel announced to the virgin Mary: "Behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give him **the throne of his father David**; and he will reign

over **the house of Jacob** forever; and **his kingdom will have no end**" (Luke 1:31-33).

Gabriel the angel is very precise in his choice of words here. He does not say that Christ is to reign over "Israel" but over "Jacob," that is, over the literal flesh and blood descendants of Abraham — the same race over which David had reigned. Had we been told that Christ will reign over the house of "Israel" many might have felt even more inclined to say it meant a "spiritual" reign in the hearts of a "spiritual" Israel. But the angel announces that the Kingdom of Christ will be a literal Jewish Kingdom over the house of Jacob on the literal throne of David. The force of this is highlighted when we compare it with 1 Kings 2: "Then Solomon sat **on the throne of David his father**, and his kingdom was firmly established" (v. 12).

If the Bible means Solomon sat on the literal throne of his father David, why should it not mean a literal reign for Christ who will also sit "on the throne of his father David" in Luke 1:32? This was based on a covenantal agreement God made with King David:

When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish **his kingdom**. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish **the throne of his kingdom forever**...and your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; **your throne** shall be established forever (2 Sam. 7:12-16; see also 1 Chron. 17:11-14).

It is clear that *the throne of Israel was synonymous with the Kingdom of God*. Every king of Israel and Judah knew that his throne was given by divine appointment. He ruled in God's name. To resist the king was to oppose God: "Do you not know that the LORD God of Israel gave the rule over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt? So now you intend to resist **the kingdom of the LORD**" (2 Chron. 13:5, 8). When the queen of Sheba saw the glory of Solomon's kingdom she exulted: "Blessed be the LORD your God who delighted in you, setting you on **His throne as king for the LORD your God**; because your God loved Israel establishing them forever; therefore He made you king over them, to do justice and righteousness" (2 Chron. 9:8). "Therefore Solomon sat **on the throne of the LORD as king** in place of his father David" (1 Chron. 29:23).

The Kingdom of God, then, is an empire ruled by the king of Israel enthroned in Jerusalem. This definition will throw a flood of light on what Jesus meant by the Good News about the Kingdom of God. The Hebrew term “kingdom of the Lord” reappears in Revelation 11:15 where, at the seventh trumpet blast, the power of present political states is to be transferred to the “Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ.”⁵¹

Thus, when we talk about “the promises to the fathers” we are to understand that the Hebrew Bible is full of the prophets’ persistent belief that on a glorious day in the future God will set up His Kingdom on earth to be administered under a just Davidic king, the Lord Messiah. When Jesus came “preaching the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel’” (Mark 1:14-15), these were his terms of reference. And we can understand that every Jew would immediately think that the promises to Abraham and David were about to come to pass. The threshold of Israel’s glorious promised future had arrived!

2. The Promised Land

The second key element in the promise made to the Jewish fathers involves the land of Palestine. Abraham was promised “all the land of Canaan” that he walked in (Gen. 17:8). That Abraham never once possessed this Promised Land is clear because he had to buy a plot of ground even to bury his dead (Gen. 23:4). Abraham was only a “stranger” in the land of promise, “as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob” (Heb. 11:9). Stephen says, God “gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground; and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that He would give it to him as a possession, and to his offspring after him” (Acts 7:5). It is clear, then, that Abraham never entered into the enjoyment of the Promised Land. For Abraham that promise is still unfulfilled. Certainly Abraham had every opportunity to return to his home country of Ur of the Chaldees. All appearances were against him. He could have gone back saying, “I’m jack of all this wandering. I’m fed up with all the flies and the dust in these tents.” When it became clear that the promise of God was still future, the temptation

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

to give up in disgust must have been great at times. But these fathers kept “looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” and so they were convinced of God’s promises and “embraced them from a distance” (Heb. 11:13). And yes, these all died without receiving the promises.

But according to the Gospel of Jesus, receive them they will, for “the time came for the dead to be judged, and the time to give their reward to Your bond-servants the prophets [Abraham, Isaac, Jacob *et al* were all prophets] and to the saints [believers of all ages] and to those who fear Your name” (Rev. 11:18). This will be the time when, as the context indicates, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and he will reign forever and ever” (v. 15). It is the time when Messiah Jesus will return “to judge the living and the dead” at “his appearing and his kingdom” (2 Tim. 4:1). Hence Jesus’ promise to the unbelieving Pharisees:

There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth there when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being cast out. And they will come from the east and west, and from north and south, and will recline at table in the kingdom of God (Luke 13:28-29).

If there is any doubt that this will be in the Promised Land on this very earth, then read again: “And the LORD will possess Judah as His portion **in the holy land**, and will again choose **Jerusalem**” (Zech. 2:12).

“In that day,” declares the LORD, “I will assemble the lame, and gather the outcasts...[and make them] a strong nation, and the LORD will reign over them in **Mount Zion** from now on and forever” (Mic. 4:6-7).

“Then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well, and I will remember **the land**” (Lev. 26:42).

“Indeed, the LORD will comfort **Zion**; He will comfort all her waste places. And her wilderness He will make like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and sound of a melody” (Is. 51:3).

A quick glance at a handful of the many verses that could be cited shows that the NT says that these promises will only be fulfilled when Christ comes back from heaven and raises the faithful

dead so they will forever live in the land of God's promise, under their anointed Messiah. The NT states that these promises are *still to be fulfilled even though Christ has already come* the first time. He will "appear a second time, not to bear sin, to those who eagerly await him, for salvation" (Heb. 9:28). In this way, all the nations of the earth will be blessed, according to the promises made to "the fathers." By detaching Jesus from "the promises given to the fathers" we rip the very heart out from the Gospel of the Kingdom he preached and for which he died. In the process we rob ourselves of any personal interest in these promises. These promises made to the fathers are the foundation of Jesus' ministry and the salvation he now offers. Christ's mission was to "confirm the promises made to the fathers." God's honour is at stake, His very truth as Romans 15:8 teaches.

I love the way John R. Rice illustrates this truth. He laments that as a child in Sunday School he was taught that at the Second Coming of Christ, this planet earth would be burned up and destroyed and disappear. He was taught that after a general judgment of all humanity, the unsaved would be consigned to everlasting hell and the redeemed would float around and sing and twang their harps in a golden city hanging in space in the "Beautiful Isle of Somewhere"! He also laments that later when he went to theological seminary this notion was only strengthened. If the meek were ever to inherit the earth, they would have to do it in this life. For all the promises to Israel really meant the Church, and the promises to Jerusalem and Mount Zion really meant heaven! He was taught that the golden age when swords will be beaten into ploughshares, and spears into pruning hooks (Is. 2:4; Mic. 4:3) and when the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:9), would be brought about by the Church preaching the Gospel and setting up a new society through its own efforts. But Rice says that when he started to study the prophetic writings of the Bible he "learned that God had promised to bring the Israelites back to their land to possess it forever, that heaven, then, must be on this earth." He goes on in his *The Coming Kingdom of Christ* with a section subtitled "If God Set Out to Destroy This World." He illustrates the utter impossibility that God should ever forget His promises to Abraham this way:

Let us imagine that to please all those...who have largely ignored the prophetic portions of the Bible, the Lord should

prepare to burn up and utterly destroy this planet or earth. Let us suppose that, as so many say, the prophecies are highly figurative anyway and that to study and teach or preach them is largely speculation, and so the Lord prepares to strike the match or say the word that will utterly destroy this whole planet. What a multitude is gathered, let us imagine, to behold that great event. But wait! I see an old man who walks like a king who comes forward to interrupt the ceremony. His face has the look of authority and his voice is bold as he cries out, "Wait, Lord; You cannot destroy my property!"

I can imagine the Lord might say, "This man is a friend of mine; let us hear what he has to say. Speak on, friend, tell the people. What is your name: To what possession do you refer: What title do you hold to the property?"

"My name," says the venerable patriarch, "is Abraham! From Ur of the Chaldees I came at Thy command. To Canaan I came and the land Thou didst give to me, teaching me by faith to know that I should afterward inherit it. To Isaac and Jacob Thou didst make the same promises, and all our days, though rich in gold and silver, cattle and servants, we lived as sojourners and pilgrims in tents, patiently waiting until we should inherit and possess forever our own land. This scroll in my hand, O Lord God, is a written deed to the land of Canaan, called by name, and signed by Thyself. It is a warranty deed, guaranteeing to me and my faithful children after me — the children of promise — the possession of the land forever. You may burn up, if You will, the weeds and thorns and thistles. Destroy, if You will, all disease germs and insect pests, which have increased the curse on the land because of man's sin through the centuries. O Lord, You may shake down and burn the cities, for I look for another city which hath foundations whose builder and maker is God. The elements may melt with fervent heat, but the land is mine; to me Thou didst give it with the promise that I should inherit it with my seed. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

If God wanted to please the ignorant and the scoffers concerning His prophecies, how would He face Abraham? The deed which Abraham has is the Bible.⁵²

John Rice describes the issue at stake here in beautiful and poignant language. He goes on to say that the Scriptures teach that “the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (2 Pet. 3:10). But the same chapter explains that that will be a judgment like the flood. 2 Peter 3:6-7 says: “The world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But the present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (2 Pet. 3:6-7).

The world once “perished” in the flood. The earth shall yet be “laid bare” in a coming day of judgment. But as the earth reappeared from the waters of the flood, to be restocked and repopulated and replanted, so in a much greater way this planet, purified of pests, disease, and the marks of sin by the literal fire of God’s wrath, will be planted again as the Garden of Eden. This planet will never be entirely removed; it can never cease to be. The fires of judgment will purge this earth, but it will not pass out of existence. It will remain to be the home of God’s people through eternity. Canaan shall in truth be the possession of Abraham and his seed, and at that time they shall possess it forever!⁵³ Or, if I may again borrow the words of another, “If the throne of David were not to reappear in Israel, with the Messiah as King, the whole Old Testament revelation would dissolve into pious legend, if not fraud.”⁵⁴

We may positively take it, then, that there is a well-defined doctrine in the Old and New Testaments that there must appear a great descendant of David who will reign on David’s throne in Jerusalem, and the monarchy of David in Palestine will be restored again in an everlasting Kingdom on earth. George Ladd says:

The truly Hebraic, prophetic hope expects the Kingdom to arise out of history and to be ruled by a descendant of David in an earthly setting...It always involves an inbreaking of

⁵² John R. Rice, *The Coming Kingdom of Christ*, Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord, 1945, pp. 28-30.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵⁴ Anthony Buzzard, *The Coming Kingdom of the Messiah*, p. 21.

God into history...The Kingdom is always an earthly hope, although an earth redeemed from the curse of evil...“The Kingdom of God” stands as a comprehensive term for all that the messianic salvation included.⁵⁵

Or, as John Rice puts it:

All the unfulfilled promises and prophecies of the Bible centre around one land, one race and one throne. These three, the throne of David, over the people Israel, in the land of Canaan, form the triple centre of all prophecy. One who understands God’s covenant with Abraham about the land Canaan, His covenant with Israel about their restoration and conversion, and the covenant with David about his throne, has the heart and centre of the prophecies. Almost as prominent in the prophecies as these three is the city of Jerusalem.⁵⁶

We commenced this sub-section by saying that the rubric over the NT is that Jesus is “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). We also noted that Jesus’ last confession concerning his identity in the NT is that he is “the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star” (Rev. 22:16). In the meantime we have shown that Jesus’ whole ministry and message was to confirm the promises made to “the fathers.” It is appropriate before moving on to the next section to take a moment for reflection and adoration of our Lord. It is all summed up in this last confession from Revelation 22. These are the words of our exalted Lord Jesus. He says two things about himself. First, he is the descendant of David and second, he is symbolized by the morning star.

As the descendant of David, Jesus is the heir to all God’s promises made to David. He is of the Davidic royal line, the Messiah. At God’s right hand, he is *still* David’s son, “the offspring of David.” He is *a human being*. Yes, a resurrection/glorification — a coronation — has taken place. But not a transmutation. He has not been changed from one nature into another, from humanity to the Deity. As David’s son, he is destined to sit on the throne of his father David (Luke 1:32; Rev. 3:21). Peter reminded his hearers that God has determined “with an oath to seat one of his [David’s] descendants upon his throne” (Acts 2:30). In the meantime, David’s

⁵⁵ G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 61.

⁵⁶ J.R. Rice, *The Coming Kingdom of Christ*, p. 60.

Lord Messiah sits at the “Lord’s [Yahweh’s] right hand waiting until his enemies are made his footstool” (Ps. 110:1; Acts 2:34-35).

The second description of Jesus here at the very end of the NT is “the bright and morning star.” He is the one who heralds the dawn of the new day, the new age. As the “star” he fulfils the prophecy: “There shall come a star out of Jacob” (Num. 24:17). As the “bright” star, he will come in great and shining glory, bringing a new era of glorification for all who look for his light, for “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2; Dan. 12:3). Lastly, as the “morning” star he is the introducer of the dawn, the dawn of the Kingdom of God. As God’s anointed one, he and he alone is qualified to bring this world into that New Age. What a fitting summary to the Gospel message of the NT: Jesus, the son of David, the son of Abraham, our “bright morning star.” Blessed be his Name forever.

Imminence

One of the difficulties confronting our Western minds is the language that Jesus used when speaking about the coming of the Kingdom. Jesus opened his ministry with the announcement that the Kingdom was “at hand.” The impression given is that the Kingdom was going to appear any minute. Once Jesus even said to his disciples, “Whenever they persecute you in this city, flee to the next; for truly I say to you, you shall not finish going through the cities of Israel, until the Son of Man comes” (Matt. 10:23). To our ears this sounds as if Jesus really did expect that he would return to bring in the Kingdom of God before the first generation of Christians had passed.

This has caused many commentators to believe that Jesus was either mistaken in this hope of a literal Kingdom of God on earth, or that his message must be taken in a spiritual sense, namely, that after the day of Pentecost he would bring the Kingdom to men’s hearts by sending the Holy Spirit. Perhaps after all, Augustine was correct to believe that the Kingdom is the Church, ruled by the Spirit of God? Otherwise, the Kingdom cannot have been “at hand,” because over 2,000 years have since intervened and Jesus has not yet appeared. We have the apparent absurdity that Jesus believed that the disciples must be still themselves going through the land of Israel to this very day and preaching the Gospel. If, on the other hand, we maintain that the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed is

the eschatological inbreaking of God at the end of this world, in what sense was it “at hand” when Jesus spoke? In the face of these apparent difficulties, the Church radically altered the message of the Gospel of the Kingdom taught by Jesus and his apostles. According to this revised theory the Kingdom cannot be a future restoration of Israel in a renewed earth ruled by Messiah and his fellow servants.

The solution lies in understanding the Jewish concept of “imminence.” We have already noted that very Hebrew style of speaking called the “prophetic past.” That is, when God decrees a thing to be, the Jews could speak of it as already having happened. God calls those things which are not yet in history, as though they already are (Rom. 4:17). The concept of immediacy is allied to this way of thinking. Immediacy is an expedient of OT prophecy by which a predicted event certain to occur is spoken of as being imminent. It is quite clear that Jesus himself did not know when the Kingdom was actually going to arrive. He plainly said he did not know the day or the hour. Only his Father in heaven knew this detail (see Mark 13:32). Although Jesus did not know the day or the hour, and although the apostles did not know it either, what they do know is that the Kingdom of God *will come; it is an absolute certainty*. This is why they can speak of it as being on the horizon.

But this still does not solve our difficulty concerning Jesus’ instructions to the disciples to keep moving throughout the towns and cities of Palestine “until the Son of Man comes” in his power. Once again, the problem is solved when we understand that:

in typical Hebrew fashion he addresses the Apostles as the representatives of an end-time preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom in the cities of Israel. Speaking to the eleven Apostles, after his own resurrection, Jesus promised, “I will be with you till the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). The promise incorporates all those “descendants” of the Apostles, i.e. disciples of Jesus who undertake the work of preaching the Kingdom until the end of the age, the return of Jesus.⁵⁷

It simply will not do, then, to eradicate Jesus’ preaching of the Kingdom of God as a still future reign of Messiah on earth at the end of this present era. We must understand the Hebrew way he spoke and taught. It is a simple fact that “references to the Kingdom

⁵⁷ Anthony Buzzard, *Focus on the Kingdom*, vol. 7, no. 5, p. 4.

as future outnumber about 20 to 1 the small number of statements in which the Kingdom is said to be, in a different sense, present.”⁵⁸

A Misguided Question?

A certain Bible college professor had just preached a whole sermon on Acts 1. Everyone in the congregation seemed very impressed and satisfied with the modern and contemporary approach this erudite scholar had taken. But I sat there feeling that I had enjoyed the veggies but wanted a steak to go with them. Where was the meat, the substance, the protein? I decided to approach the Bible college speaker and politely ask him the question that was on my mind. After complimenting him (always a courteous way to start) I said, “You omitted verse 6 from your sermon. The disciples asked Jesus, ‘Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?’ What do you make of their question?” The answer I was given did not surprise. It is what I was taught in Bible college myself. It is what most expositors and commentators say. His reply was: “The disciples still did not get it, did they? Their minds were still stuck in that old Jewish idea that Jesus came to beat back the enemies of Israel and to set up a political empire where Israel through their Messiah would rule the world. The disciples’ question shows how thick and slow they were. It was a misguided question. It must have frustrated Jesus big time.”

There is perhaps no other verse in the NT that has been more misunderstood than Acts 1:6. Let’s set the scene. The Lord Jesus has been raised from the dead. “By many convincing proofs” he has demonstrated to the disciples that he really is alive. But soon he is to leave them for good. He will be taken up into heaven. No doubt these forty days between the resurrection and Jesus’ ascension were very precious to the disciples. Luke summarizes the final topic of conversation between the disciples and the Lord Jesus. If I read it rightly, there really was only one main topic on Jesus’ agenda for that whole post-resurrection period. Jesus was “**speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God**” (v. 3). This is precisely the same burden and topic that had occupied his whole pre-crucifixion ministry!

One has to wonder: since Jesus was always “speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God” — even after his

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

resurrection — why has the belief that the disciples were thick and slow to ask their question in verse 6 persisted? The reformer John Calvin is typical of an inept exposition of the Gospel. Amazingly Calvin said that this question from the disciples has more errors in it than there are words! Calvin maintained that their blindness was remarkable, that after careful instruction over three years they betrayed no less ignorance than if they had never heard a word! William Barclay concurs with this sentiment:

Throughout his ministry Jesus laboured under one great disadvantage. The centre of his message was the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14). But the trouble was that he meant one thing by the Kingdom and those who listened to him meant quite another...They took that to mean that they were inevitably destined for special honour and privilege and for worldwide dominion...They looked for a day when by divine intervention the world sovereignty they dreamed of would be theirs. They conceived of the Kingdom in political terms. How did Jesus conceive of it? [Barclay will now give his own understanding based on the petition in the Lord's prayer: "Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."] We see that, by the Kingdom, Jesus meant a society upon earth where God's will would be as perfectly done as it is in heaven.⁵⁹

Here Barclay has spoken a part-truth. The Kingdom will indeed be a society on earth, but equally it will be a society ushered in by the return of Jesus to rule the world with his people from all ages. Barclay commits the classic error of equating the Kingdom with the Church. In another place Barclay states unequivocally, "The only throne he [Jesus] could ever occupy was a throne in men's hearts."⁶⁰ This is typical traditional thinking. The idea that the Kingdom of God is merely "spiritual" and that wherever God's people are found "labouring in the cause of human brotherhood, love and compassion, there the King of the Jews is enthroned" is ubiquitous and destructive of the Gospel of the Kingdom Jesus preached.⁶¹ Mathew Henry's commentary also follows this traditional pattern. According to Henry the disciples "thought Christ would *restore the*

⁵⁹ William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1953, pp. 3-4.

⁶⁰ William Barclay, *Jesus as They Saw Him*, p. 243.

⁶¹ Schonfield, *The Passover Plot*, p. 206.

kingdom to Israel, whereas Christ (actually) came to set up his own kingdom, and that a kingdom of heaven, not to *restore the kingdom* to Israel, an earthly kingdom.”⁶²

Many commentators and Christians have been misled for centuries about the nature of God’s Kingdom by the well-known mistranslation of Luke 17:21, “The kingdom of God is **within** you.” Today all serious scholars and translators agree that the text should read: “The kingdom of God is *among* you or *in your midst*.” The Greek word *entos* can mean “within” or “among” but in the present context to translate it “within” would mean that in answer to the Pharisees’ question about when the Kingdom of God would come (Luke 17:20), Jesus told them that the Kingdom of God was within *them*! This would contradict everything else Jesus ever said about the Kingdom or about the Pharisees. Moreover, since every other reference to the Kingdom presupposes that it is yet to come and since the verb in every other clause in the passage (Luke 17:20-37) is in the future tense, this verse must be understood to mean that one day they will find that the Kingdom of God is suddenly and unexpectedly in their midst.⁶³

This false concept that the Kingdom of God was the reign of God “within the believer’s heart” historically grew out of the fact that the Church had early on to face the acute problem of the postponement of its earthly expectations. Clearly, God’s Kingdom through His Messiah had not arrived on earth in its final form. Perhaps then Jesus had got his Messianic hope wrong? Perhaps all Jesus meant to do was to set up his throne in men’s hearts? Rather lamely and unconvincingly, the Church “spiritualized” its Jesus and his message was divested of its Messianic content. However, the assumption that the personally-instructed disciples of Jesus did not know what the Kingdom of God meant rests on a failure to understand the Messianism of Jesus’ Gospel and poor exegesis of Acts 1. It points to the Church’s rejection of and failure to comprehend the message of all the prophets of Israel. It also misrepresents the message constantly preached by the apostles throughout the book of Acts, as I will now show.

⁶² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible, Genesis to Revelation*, London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1960, p. 435, emphasis original.

⁶³ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, pp. 46-47.

Let us first firmly fix in our minds that Acts 1:6 records the disciples' final question to Jesus before he is taken away from them. No time any more for leisurely chats by the seaside. When somebody we love dearly is about to leave us for good, there is no idle chit-chat. The whole of Jesus' program hangs in the balance here, with this handful of selected men who have been with him from the beginning. The subject under discussion (just to underline the context again) is "the things concerning the kingdom of God" (v. 3). In the same breath (note the conjunction "and" in v. 4) Jesus commands the disciples to wait for the promised Holy Spirit. To the Hebrew mind, mention of the coming of the Spirit was associated with the coming of the Messianic glory prophesied in the Old Testament. Many passages in the Hebrew Bible predicted that when Messiah sets up his earthly Kingdom, that Age will be an age of the Spirit of Lord. That glorious Age will be marked by an unprecedented outpouring of the Spirit and knowledge and power of the LORD. That Kingdom age of the Spirit will be marked by the renewal of all nature and the blessing of Israel (e.g. Is. 11:1-9). In the Jewish mind, the Kingdom of God was synonymous with the renewing power of the Spirit. So when the disciples hear that the Spirit is about to come, their antennas go up immediately! They ask their *logical* question: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (v. 6).

Let's not miss the point now. Jesus does give a caution, but it is a caution only about *the time* of that expected restoration, not *the fact* of the restoration: "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:7-8). Two distinct events are in mind here: The coming of the Spirit "not many days from now" (v. 5) *and* the coming of the Kingdom at a time unknown in the future (v. 6-7). Empowerment for ministry by the coming of the Spirit — only days away — *and* the coming of the Kingdom for the renewal of all things on earth — down the track at a time only known to the Father. Thus, *two distinct times and events* are in mind here, proving beyond any shadow of doubt that the Kingdom did not come on the day of Pentecost! The coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost was the deposit, the downpayment, "the pledge of our inheritance" (Eph. 1:14) for that

future Kingdom. The coming of the Spirit gives the enablement to live as Christ's witnesses *until* the hope of the restored Kingdom to Israel becomes reality. In the interim period the Church is to announce "the testimony of Jesus," the Gospel of the Kingdom, and thus speak prophetically in "the spirit of prophecy" (Rev. 19:10).

The disciples' question about Jesus now restoring the Kingdom to Israel represents the *climax* of Jesus' life and ministry. Far from being block-headed dolts, they prove only how "thick" subsequent theology is when it interprets the Kingdom as being this current Church age! Equating the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost with the (as yet future) Kingdom of God has ripped the heart out of Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom. It has deprived the people of a brilliant future hope.

In the medical field, there is anecdotal information that occasionally after undergoing a complete heart transplant a person's personality can change. I have from time to time heard this in my work as a paramedic. With someone else's heart now beating in the patient's chest, sometimes relatives are amazed at the personality changes. In parallel allegorical fashion, the Church has unknowingly lain on the operating table and agreed to a heart transplant that altered its whole personality, so to speak. Instead of a Hebrew heart beating with the pulsating hope of the coming Kingdom of God under God's appointed Lord Messiah, we now find ourselves in a weakened, insipid state, drugged by a substitute donor (Gentile) heart transplant which shows every sign of being rejected by its body. Or, to use the illustration I used at the beginning of this chapter, a cuckoo gospel — "another gospel" — has installed itself in the nest!

If further proof is necessary that the disciples got it right with their question, we only have to read the rest of the book of Acts to see how prominent a place the coming Kingdom of God played in the apostles' preaching and witness. In Acts 3 the apostles Peter and John miraculously heal a lame man. The man who was born lame is now walking and leaping and yelling praises to God. This creates no small stir. A crowd of curious people gathers and Peter starts preaching to them. He tells the crowd that the man has been healed in the name of Jesus, the Jesus they were responsible for crucifying. Peter explains to the crowd that Jesus has been raised from the dead by God and taken to heaven, and is waiting for the appointed time to return to earth, exactly as "announced beforehand by the mouth of

all the prophets” (Acts 3:18). Peter adds that because Messiah Jesus is now in heaven, God’s promises for the Kingdom are guaranteed. In fact, *Peter uses language almost identical to the question the disciples had asked before Jesus’ ascension in Acts 1:6:*

Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that **times of refreshing** may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Messiah appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until **the times of restoration of all things** about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time (Acts 3:19-21).

The careful reader will observe the close connection between these verses and the question the disciples put to Jesus concerning the restoration of the Davidic throne. Luke who wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts is very consistent on this point. The angel Gabriel announced to Mary before she bore Jesus that “he will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David; and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and his kingdom will have no end” (Luke 1:32-33).

It is clear that for Dr. Luke, the restoration of Israel under the Messiah who appears from heaven is synonymous with the restoration of the throne of David and the coming of the Kingdom of God. Anthony Buzzard draws our attention to Luke’s “interchangeable phrases” with this summary:

The arrival of the apocalyptic Kingdom (Luke 21:31) = the redemption of the disciples (Luke 21:28) = redemption in Jerusalem (Luke 2:38) = the redemption of Israel (Luke 24:21).

The expected future Kingdom (Luke 23:51) = the expected consolation of Israel (Luke 2:25).

The restoration of the Kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6) = the times of the restoration of all that was promised through the mouth of the prophets (Acts 3:21) = the restoration of the house of David as promised through the mouth of the prophets (Luke 1:70) = the enthronement of Jesus on the throne of David to which he is heir (Luke 1:32, 33).⁶⁴

If the reader will take the time to compare these references, he/she will clearly see that the great events Luke talks about

⁶⁴ Anthony Buzzard, *Our Fathers Who Aren't in Heaven*, p. 189.

concerning the throne of David and the expected consolation of Israel were not fulfilled when the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, and therefore do not apply to the Church this side of Christ's return. Jesus' absence in heaven is a temporary interlude pending the end of this present age. "Gabriel's opening announcement about the restoration of the throne of David (Luke 1:32) and the disciples' closing question about the restoration of Israel (Acts 1:6) bracket the whole of Luke's account of the Christian faith."⁶⁵

An examination of the content of the Gospel preached in the book of Acts also proves that the disciples understood that Jesus was going to return to fulfill all that the Hebrew Scriptures had predicted concerning the Kingdom, Israel and the Davidic dynasty of the Lord Messiah. In Acts 8 Philip was conducting a very successful evangelistic campaign in Samaria. We read that he was "**preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Messiah**" (v. 12). The apostles "in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received **the word of God**" (v. 14). Here again we observe Luke's synonymous terms. "The Kingdom of God" is equivalent to "the word of God." Wherever we read that the apostles preached "the word" or proclaimed "the gospel" or preached "the name of Jesus Messiah" (as further on in verses 25 and 35) we are to understand that Luke means they preached "the Kingdom of God" with all of its Hebrew content. This interchange of terms is recorded also in Acts 14: "And after they had preached **the gospel** to that city...they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch...saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter **the kingdom of God**'...And when they had spoken **the word** in Perga, they went down to Attalia" (v. 21, 22, 25).

Again, "And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about **the kingdom of God**...And this took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard **the word of the Lord**, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:8, 10).

When the apostle Paul describes the preaching ministry which he received from the Lord Jesus "to testify solemnly of **the gospel of the grace of God**" he immediately defines this gospel of grace as "preaching **the kingdom**" (Acts 20:24-25)! And right up to the end of his life, as recorded in the last chapters of Acts, Paul reminds his

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

audience that he always testified about the Gospel of “**the kingdom of God**” and attempted to persuade them about Jesus as the centre of God’s plan and how the Messiah fit all that “the Law of Moses” and “the Prophets” had predicted (Acts 28:23). Indeed this Kingdom of God emphasis is underlined in Luke’s very last verse: Paul welcomed all who came to him, “preaching **the kingdom of God**, and teaching concerning **the Lord Jesus Messiah**” (Acts 28:31). As George Ladd comments, “It is of great interest that Luke summarizes the content of Paul’s preaching to the Gentiles by the utterly non-Hellenistic phrase ‘the kingdom of God.’”⁶⁶

Many have tried to promote the idea that Paul preached the Gospel of the Kingdom to the Jews, and that he did not speak of the Kingdom to Gentiles. This fallacy is easily disposed of. We have already observed how he applied the Abrahamic promises to all Christians, whether Jew or Gentile (e.g. Gal. 3:14, 29). Paul warns that all who do not live in the faith, purity and power of that coming Kingdom “shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:21). One of Paul’s great rallying calls to the Corinthian church, who were taking each other before the civil courts, was to ask rhetorically, “Do you not know that the saints [true believers] are to manage the world? If the world is to come under your jurisdiction, are you incompetent to adjudicate upon trifles?” (1 Cor. 6:2-3, Moffat). Paul echoed Jesus’ teaching that we are in training for positions of authority and management (cp. “fellow-heirs with Christ,” Rom. 8:17) in the coming Kingdom. How out of character then, says Paul, for these Christians not to be showing they were fit for this future royal office in the Kingdom of God, by currently treating each other poorly. Nor should we overlook the connection the writer to the Hebrews (many believe the writer was Paul) makes between the promised “great salvation” and the hope of supervising the coming “future inhabited earth” (Heb. 2:3, 5). No matter what trials and sacrifices the believer may undergo in this present evil world, the apostolic hope was always that “If we suffer with him [now], we shall reign with him [then]” (2 Tim. 2:12). And “the momentary, light affliction [now] is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison [then]” (2 Cor. 4:17).

The united testimony of all NT Gospel preaching is the good news announced to all, Jew and Gentile, male and female, about the

⁶⁶ G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 333.

coming Kingdom of God. It is about how Jesus is the promised Lord Messiah who will bring all of God's promises to "the fathers" to pass. It is about how God's appointed Man will come to destroy Satan's hold on this world (Acts 17:31), and how the Messianic Age to Come will be the time when the Spirit of the Lord will bring the promised refreshing and restoration of all things on earth that the prophets had spoken. For Luke then, the disciples' question in Acts 1:6 was the right question. The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost would empower them to proclaim the coming Kingdom, when Jesus the Messiah will sit on the Davidic throne of Israel, and all the nations of the earth will be under his reign of righteousness and everlasting peace.

When the cloud of confusion over the Kingdom of God is lifted and when commentators believe what the New Testament says about the future, it will become clear that Acts 1:6 is a text which sits in judgment on our failure to believe the prophets and Jesus and our reluctance to accept that the Apostles knew better than we do what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God.⁶⁷

Following Jesus involves believing what he believed, that he will judge the nations and establish his royal palace in Jerusalem. To believe in the Jesus of the New Testament is to be persuaded of and committed to the Kingdom he will preside over. May God give us all grace to share the same apostolic hope that "we through the Spirit, by faith, [may be] waiting for the hope of righteousness" (Gal. 5:5) and that we may *not* be amongst those who "shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:21). Faithfulness to his Gospel of the Kingdom in this life prepares us for positions of joint rule with King Jesus (Luke 19:17). The apostles believed his Gospel-word: "Just as my Father has granted me a kingdom by covenant, I covenant with you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:29-30). We must believe the Gospel-word of Jesus delivered by him and later by his commissioned apostles, so that when Jesus the Messiah returns we too, if found loyal to him, will help manage his affairs on a renewed earth. We will by his resurrection power enter the enjoyment of our citizenship as sons of

⁶⁷ Anthony Buzzard, *Our Fathers Who Aren't in Heaven*, p. 196.

the Kingdom in new and never-dying, never-diseased bodies (Phil. 3:20-21; Rom. 8:23), with all tears wiped away (Rev. 21:4).

The Christian Gospel tells us that what mankind lost through Adam is going to be regained in the Kingdom of the Messiah. The Gospel calls us to co-rulership with Christ over the new Paradise on earth. This alone answers that deep sense within man's soul that something he was initially made for is missing. The glory lost will be glory restored. Originally made for dignity under God, originally made to "subdue" the earth and to rule over this world with a management of love and care, man tragically lost his right to kingship. The Gospel of God's Kingdom announces that it will be fully restored. God's great plan promised to Eve, Abraham and David is moving towards this great goal. It will finally be made good through our Lord Jesus Messiah. History is going somewhere. When the fullness of time has come, God the Father, the one true God of Jesus is going to sum up all things in Christ, whether they be things in heaven or things upon the earth (Eph. 1:10). God's honour and ultimate glory depend on this Gospel of the Kingdom. At Christ's coming all hostile rule and power will be abolished under the headship of Jesus the Messiah. After a thousand years our blessed Lord and Saviour will hand over the Kingdom to his Father, "that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:24-28). If this hope of a renewed earth under God's universal King Jesus is not realized, then God's great covenant with Abraham and David will have failed utterly. The Gospel of the Kingdom will have turned out to be one big hoax. The "fathers" and the prophets and the apostles will have been deluded fools. They will have died in vain. They have led us astray. God is a liar. Christ is darkness. The Devil and evil win. There is no justice. There is no Good News.

But we are not of those who have no hope. We are not among those who shrink back in unbelief. Christ is alive! Christ is alive! "Behold, he comes in the clouds, and every eye shall see him, even those who crucified him will see the King and mourn" (Rev. 1:7). Even now we can taste of the powers of that age to come (Heb. 6:5). We, with all the faithful of all generations, look for that Kingdom "which cannot be shaken" (Heb. 12:28). We anticipate the day when "the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come" and when "the accuser of our brethren" (Rev. 12:10), the one now deceiving the whole world, will be bound "so he cannot deceive the nations any longer" (Rev. 20:3).

What a privilege to be among those to whom “it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 13:11). God grant us all to intelligently receive and commit to this “word of the Kingdom” so that the Devil may not rob us of the hope God has given us all through His Son Jesus Christ our Lord (Matt. 13:19).

May I repeat Anthony Buzzard’s ringing challenge quoted earlier in this chapter? It captures the Gospel invitation beautifully:

The Gospel as Jesus preached it invites you also to dedicate the rest of your life to preparation for participation in the supervision of that future Kingdom on a renewed earth. You are invited to be a co-heir of the Kingdom with the Messiah. In short, the Jesus of history, the original “theocrat,” continues his work of recruiting members of his royal household, the theocratic party, who are urged to prepare themselves with divine help to take part in the Messiah’s government of the future. This will be the first and only administration to rule the world successfully.⁶⁸

The challenge is clear. As Christians we must go back to the beginning and search out anew in the context of the Jewish vision, which the Church forsook, the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. As Schonfield challenges:

Reading through reams of modern Christian theology it is hard to find any awareness that the Messianism which gave Christianity its name, Messianism in its native Jewish expression, may hold the secret which could give the Church life from the dead. We must say that either Messianism was the essence of the Gospel, or that Christianity from its very inception was a fraud. Everything else can go, but here is the rock on which the Kingdom of God was to be founded.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Anthony Buzzard, *The Coming Kingdom of the Messiah*, p. 7.

⁶⁹ Hugh Schonfield, *Those Incredible Christians*, p. 239.