

Focus on the Kingdom

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Salvation and All Those Big Words

Theological tomes as well as more popular writing on the Christian faith contain some heavy terminology. Becoming a Christian, we are told, means “repentance, conversion, regeneration, justification, sanctification.” If Christians are to receive the Truth with intelligence they must know what these words mean in the Bible. Zeal without knowledge is an ever-present hazard in the world of religion. Observe how Paul commended his fellow Jews for their tireless zeal, and then announced that they lacked the proper knowledge for salvation. He determined to save as many as he could from their ignorance (Rom. 10:1-3). We are obliged in our personal search for saving Truth to become informed. It would appear that Jesus’ awful words about the many who will claim to have been Christians and who really were not, ought to be kept in mind always (Matt. 7: 21ff). In this connection we should avoid falling for the trap that it is only *ethics* (Christian behavior) which counts. Paul saw “doctrinal” errors as just as much of a threat as false ideas of Christian conduct (for example II Thess. 2:1-3; II Tim. 2:17, 18).

Could it be that a similar situation in regard to “zeal without knowledge” has developed in our time? Do tracts and tomes really tell us how to be saved? The primary question is: What did Jesus declare to be the basis for being saved? And what does it mean to be saved anyway?

We can answer the last question first. To be saved in the Bible means to be rescued from the curse of death which is a certainty for all of us. As part of Adam’s company, we are born to die. We must therefore be *reborn* (regenerated) to live (see our article in *Focus*, July 1999). And living will mean being resurrected from the death-state and receiving the gift of living forever and ever — immortality. As to our

function as immortals, it is to serve as under-sovereigns with Jesus, who at the resurrection (I Cor. 15:23; Luke 14:14) will return to the earth from heaven in order to take charge of the inheritance which God has granted him — the supervision of a new order of things on earth (Matt. 5:5; Rev. 5:10). Jerusalem in Palestine will be the headquarters of the new government which will improve immeasurably the human condition on earth. The great arch-criminal, the deceiver *par excellence*, will have been deposed from his present position as “prince of the power of the sub-lunar space” (Eph. 2:2). He will have been arrested and incarcerated beyond the limits of the earth (Rev. 20:1-3). He will deceive the nations no longer. The Kingdom of Christ and the saints will extend its beneficent influence from shore to shore and the earth will gradually be permeated with the knowledge of God.

Of this stupendously exciting time coming the prophets of Israel sing on page after page. They tell of conditions in which restoration of Paradise (one does not have to be a Jehovah’s Witness to believe in a restored Paradise; the Bible is replete with this guarantee!) will turn the earth into a Utopia. International peace will result from the fact that restored Jerusalem (Isa. 1:26) will be the world-center of the new economy, the “inhabited earth of the future of which we are speaking” (Heb. 2:5). Jeremiah foresaw the time coming when God will “give you Shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding” (3:15). (Knowledge and understanding are therefore as vital to well-being as physical nourishment is for physical health.)

“‘And it will be in those [famous] days when you are multiplied and increased in the land,’ declares the God of Israel, ‘they shall say no more, “The ark of the

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Covenant of the LORD.” And it shall not come to mind, nor shall they remember it, nor shall they miss it, nor shall it be made again. At that [future] time they shall call Jerusalem the Throne [Kingdom] of the LORD, and all the nations will be gathered to it, to Jerusalem, to the name of the LORD; nor shall they walk anymore after the stubbornness of their evil heart. In those days the house of Judah will walk with the House of Israel and they will come together from the land of the North to the land that I gave your fathers as an inheritance” (Jer. 3:16-18).

But back to the long words. What will it take for us to be assured of a part in that glorious coming society of the Kingdom of God on earth? How shall we define repentance? To repent is to change your mind, heart and will and reorientate your life in a brand new direction. Repentance means, on the negative side, turning *from* all forms of evil (evil as defined by the Bible, not by human criteria, religious or otherwise) and turning, on the positive side, *to* the Christian Gospel *about the Kingdom*.

Jesus’ ministry was based on a very well-defined foundation. His work is summarized and encapsulated in a few brief words recorded for us at the opening of Matthew, Mark and Luke (John uses different terminology to convey the same Truth). How does Mark condense the work and purpose of Jesus? Jesus came preaching a definite message: “Repent and believe in the Gospel.” Repent — turn away from your present lifestyle and thought patterns and believe — turn towards a new belief-system as the guiding power of your life — believe in the Gospel *about the Kingdom* (see Mark 1:14, 15; Matt. 3:2, John the Baptist’s Gospel; 4:17, 23; Luke 4:43, Jesus’ Gospel). Baptism in water is the New Testament public ceremony to mark the individual’s repentance and initiation into the faith — his new commitment to Jesus and the Gospel of the Kingdom which defines Jesus’ teaching.

It is a serious misreading of biblical Christianity propagated constantly by tract and other Christian propaganda to suppose that belief in Jesus’ *death* is the only requirement for believers. This is patently not true, since Jesus began his saving ministry by issuing the command to repent and believe in the Gospel *about the Kingdom* and its nearness, long before he uttered a word about his death and resurrection. We must emphasize this point: “Repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mark 1:14, 15) cannot mean “Repent and

believe that I died for you and rose again.” Jesus had not died, nor mentioned his death, when he uttered these words! Yet he commanded repentance and belief in *the Gospel*. There is thus a substratum foundation to the gospel which is usually completely missing from current statements about what we must believe to repent and be saved. Merely go on the web and search out the definitions of the Gospel offered to the public: Chances are excellent that you will not see a word about believing *the Gospel of the Kingdom*. Christianity is constantly presented as though it is a religion restricted to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Instead of biblical Christianity this seems to be “Crossianity.” It is a gospel which shrinks the Gospel as Jesus and the Apostles preached it.

“Repent and believe in the Gospel of the Kingdom” is Christianity’s slogan. The genius of the faith is encapsulated in those first words and initial command uttered by Jesus himself. Should not *Jesus* be allowed to set the terms of the Christian faith? Or shall we simply believe what we have always been told? The need for a Berean biblical exercise in investigation of the meaning of repentance, belief and Gospel is more than ever needed (Acts 17:11).

Jesus began his mission with the call to repentance and demanded *faith in his Message* — the Message about the coming Kingdom of God. It was a Kingdom whose powers were demonstrated in advance by Jesus operating in the spirit of God, his Father. Yet it was a Kingdom which the faithful were still *waiting for* after the ministry and death had happened (Mark 15:43). It was a Kingdom in which the faithful expected to administer a new world order with Jesus (Matt. 20:20-23; Mark 10:35-40; Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30; I Cor 6:2; II Tim 2:12; Rev. 2:26; 3:21; 5:10; 20:1-6). This was an ambition cherished by the mother of John and James as the highest honor to be bestowed on a human being. It was an ambition to be sought only at the cost of sacrifice and suffering perfectly modeled by Jesus himself. Yet it was an ambition to preside with Jesus over the “concrete” empire of the world which every instructed Jew, including Jesus, knew to be the Messianic Kingdom promised by Scripture.

In the Bible faith means trust in God’s word/Message/Gospel (Mark 1:14, 15) and conscientious compliance with New Testament patterns of lifestyle. The object of faith is God’s *promise*, not just vaguely His Person. Faith in God’s

*Jesus required faith
in his Message, not
just his death.*

Person, in the absence of a definition of His *Message*, easily degenerates into a confusing mysticism unrelated to Jesus as the accredited agent of God. In the matter of faith and repentance, therefore, the word/words/Gospel/teaching of Jesus are of the greatest importance.

“Abraham had faith in God — that is, he trusted His promise — and went out, not knowing where he was going (Heb. 11:8).” These are the words of the celebrated *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*. They provide a much-needed correction to popular loose thinking on the issue of faith. The Dictionary adds: “Because of this trust he will one day receive his reward; but this reward still lies in the future” (Heb. 11:13, 39). This concise statement exposes the popular cherished idea that Abraham and the faithful have *already* received their reward. In fact the patriarchs will emerge to the life of the coming Kingdom via resurrection to occur at the future return of Jesus. At present the dead are just that — dead. And no one, according to the Bible, is suffering a purification in purgatory or endless torment in hell. And no human person except Jesus is enjoying a post-mortem bliss in “heaven.”

Jesus was most insistent that it is via his Message that repentance, faith, conversion and rebirth originate. “He who *hears my Message/Gospel* and believes Him who sent me has the Life of the Age to come” (John 5:24). Jesus did not say, “He who just believes that I died for him and rose...” He did say, “I am the way, truth and life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). “Through Jesus” means *through his word* (see John 5:24 above). Jesus “is” the Truth means that he is the one who spoke and revealed the Truth and it is through this Truth that men can come to God and receive the life of God. There is no salvation apart from the words of Jesus, as well as his death and resurrection. The popular salvation tract which attributes to Jesus these words is misleading: “I did **ALL** the work necessary for salvation when I died on the cross.” Compare this with Jesus’ actual words: “I came to preach the Gospel about the Kingdom: that is the reason God commissioned me” (Luke 4:43).

An unfortunate habit of partial quotation of biblical verses promotes the popular misunderstanding of the teaching of Jesus. “Whoever believes in me [Jesus] will not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16) must be explained by the verses which often do not appear: “He who **HEARS MY WORD/Gospel** and believes Him who sent me...” (John 5:24). Note

also: “If you do not believe the writings of Moses, how will you believe *my words?*” (John 5:47).

Trying to believe in Jesus without comprehending the words/message/Gospel of Jesus is perilous. Thus Luke records: “When they believed Philip as he preached the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and the Name of Jesus, they were getting baptized, men and women.” This precious verse in Acts 8:12 provides the paradigm of New Testament faith and practice. Repentance and baptism were administered, according to this early model creed, when converts had grasped the News about the Kingdom. After all Jesus had plainly stated that “seeing the mystery of the Kingdom” was the proof that repentance had occurred, and that eyes were open to God’s Kingdom plan. Our human problem (not absent from the churches) is our blindness to how God is at work through the Gospel of the Kingdom. Mark 4:11, 12 should be pondered with care: “While seeing they do not see [the mystery of the Kingdom]. *If they did*, they would be converted and I would forgive them.”✧

The Task of Teaching the Bible

Preachers and teachers of the Bible are obligated not only to explain and expound positively the benefits and blessings and promises guaranteed to the believer, but also to warn against the dangers of false interpretation. Paul does this all the time. In his letter to the Thessalonians his “bipolar” mindset is very clear. The faith, he keeps saying, is *not* this, *but that*. In other words he tells us what *not* to believe and do as well as what to believe and do. Truth and error need to be defined with clarity. Truth is the compass point to which successful faith must always be directed, and error and falsehood are to be avoided at all costs. In a classic revelation of his own mind (and the mind of Jesus who inspired him) Paul says, with a note of tragedy, “Because it was *the love of the Truth* they would not receive in order to be saved. Therefore God gave them over to a spirit of blindness so that they would believe what is false” (2 Thess. 2:10, 11). If we do not desire above all to search for and embrace Truth, God will allow us to careen off into confusion.

The task of Bible teaching is clear, then. We must discern Truth and having detected falsehood abandon it deliberately and without compromise.

This approach is simple and utterly necessary in view of Jesus’ alarming words. We make no apology

for repeating them: “It is not everyone who addresses me [Jesus] as ‘Lord’ who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven [the Messianic Kingdom on earth to be inaugurated by the return of Jesus], but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many [presumably the majority] will protest on that day [when the future Kingdom is introduced]: ‘Lord, Lord, did we not preach as Christians, did we not perform Christian exorcism and work many wonderful miracles under your authority?’ And then I will declare to them: ‘I never recognized you as my disciples and servants’” (Matt. 7:21-23). (I have paraphrased slightly in the interests of vivid translation.)

Obviously it is not atheists and non-Christians who are judged here. It is professing followers of Jesus. The majority who are confident that they are true believers will find out they never have been! This is a startling passage deserving our earnest attention. How could we be deceived? Evidently by accepting as “Christian” what is in fact not Christian teaching.

May we comment on this issue from two angles, both the subject of former articles in *Focus*. Our remarks on the dangers of confusing a healthy interest in the Jewishness of true Christianity with out-and-out rejection of freedom from some of the prescriptions of the Law of Moses in Christ, prompted kind comments from many readers. They agreed that mandatory Sabbath-keeping, the use of only Hebrew names for God and Jesus, did not reflect the atmosphere of New Testament teaching, particularly as detailed by Paul. On the other hand some who kindly registered their opposition to what we said insisted that Jesus everywhere insisted on commandment-keeping, including therefore resting on the Sabbath (Saturday). The problem here is that the book of Galatians (as well as Rom. 14 and Col. 2:16, 17) were not dealt with. The (to many) obvious non-application of the Sinai Covenant to Christians, about which Paul waxes so eloquent in Galatians 3, 4, 5, was left out of consideration. Where exponents of mandatory Sabbath-keeping do attempt to deal with Galatians they resort to an impossible re-translation of the text. They claim that Paul’s view that “we are not *under the law*” actually means that we are not under *the penalty* of the law.

Paul quite deliberately sets aside the Old Testament law of circumcision. The heart of the law as binding on Old Testament Israel is thus neutralized. “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything....” “I testify again to

every man who receives circumcision that he is under obligation to the whole Law.” “Christ will then be of no benefit to you” (see Gal. 5:3-6). Strong words!

The solution to the tension which may be found in the New Testament between Law-keeping and freedom from Law is simply this: “Law” is used in two different senses: When it means “adherence to the will of God in Christ,” it is essential for all believers. When “Law” means certain laws given to Israel, particularly under Moses, it is no longer Law for Christians, who are under the Covenant of Promise (of the land, as co-heirs with Christ) made with Abraham. Discerning the difference is our aim and the result, we are confident, will be the unity of many now divided believers.

The second issue which provoked dismay among a few of our readers had to do with the nature of Christ’s preexistence. Does the Bible teach us to believe that Jesus “is God,” uncreated and coeternal with the Father? Along with a strong minority tradition we answer, no. How then could Jesus have said to the Father: “Glorify me with the glory which I had with you before the world was” (John 17:5)? The objection is a reasonable one and deserves a response.

Firstly, the whole of Scripture must be consulted, not a single verse. In no verse of the Old Testament is it suggested that the Messiah, Son of God, would be God, coequal and uncreated. In every relevant passage the Messiah is to be a human being descended from David, Son of God, and a prophet arising in Israel “like Moses” (see Deut 18:15-18; Acts 3:22; 7:37; Luke 1:35; II Sam. 7:14 quoted in Heb. 1:5 and Psalm 2:7 quoted in Acts 13:33 of the production of Jesus — v. 34 speaks of his resurrection). No Jewish writing outside the Bible says that the Messiah was to be consciously alive before his birth from his mother. Matthew, Mark and Luke have nothing to say about a conscious existence of the Son of God, Messiah, before he was born. It is therefore odd to insist that John alone among the gospel writers claims a conscious preexistence for Jesus. If we believe in the harmony of all Scripture we will naturally want to see if John may be united with his fellow gospel writers and with the whole of the Old Testament.

As we approach John 17:5, we should bear in mind the peril of thinking you know what an Englishman means when he says “I am mad about my flat” or that a Japanese person with limited English will know what you mean when you say “he pulled my leg” or “I have a frog in my throat.”

Jewish ways of thinking and speaking, and not 20th-century use of language, must govern our reading of the first century Jewish documents we know as the New Testament. The immediate context of any given saying of Jesus is also of prime importance. What do we learn about “glory” in John 17?

1. The same glory which the Father has given Jesus, Jesus has *already given* to disciples who are *not yet even born*. “The glory which you [Father] have given me I have given to them [the ones who are later going to be converted by the Apostles, v.20]” (v. 22).

2. The glory discussed in John 17 is the glory of the future Kingdom of Jesus which the disciples are going to see *in the future*. In other words it is Jesus’ *future* glory which he desires to share with his disciples. John 17:24: “Father, I desire that that they also, whom you have given me, be with me where I am, in order that they may behold my glory which you have given me.”

3. The glory which Jesus requests for himself is the glory he expects to receive as the reward for his completed Messianic work: “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son...I glorified You on earth, having accomplished the work which You gave me to do, and now glorify Me together with Yourself with the glory which I had with you before the world was.”

It is clear that the glory in question is glory which “has been given” but which is not yet possessed by Jesus or the disciples. It is glory which “has been given” even to disciples who are not yet even born! It is glory in prospect. The glory which Jesus desires to have as the reward of his work is the glory which he “had” as a gift in God’s intention and plan before the world was. What “has been given” is the same as what is in one’s possession, but it is a possession promised for the future and granted in the Plan of God. The meaning of Jesus’ prayer to the Father is this: “Give me now the glory in your company which I had stored up with you as your prospective gift for me on the completion of my work.” We might compare the case of Jeremiah whose appointment to the office of prophet was given to him before he was born. He “had” that office prior to birth as a gift in God’s intention (Jer. 1:5).

As evidence from the Jewish background contemporary with the New Testament we should note that the Jewish Sybilline Oracles and the earlier part of the Book of Enoch speak of the Messiah, as does the Bible, as the divinely sent King, who arises from

the people of God. In the Psalms of Solomon, around 50 AD, the Messiah is a perfect King, the Son of David and of God, but not preexisting his birth literally. True, the “name” and office of the Messiah are present with God before the creation, but the Messiah himself comes into existence at a given moment in the history of Israel. How else could he qualify as a human person, the last Adam and Son of God? (Son of God in the Bible means you are *not* God!) The Son of Man, the human Messiah, “exists” in vision only in the Old Testament. He is found in Daniel 7 in a panoramic preview of future history. But he is not actually alive when Daniel lived. It was not Jesus who rescued Daniel’s friends from the furnace, but an angel.

A Jewish writer contemporary with the New Testament stated that “The Lord prepared me before the foundation of the world, to be the mediator of the covenant” (Parables of Enoch, 1:14). In this passage the person “prepared before creation” is Moses, who certainly did not preexist literally. He was real however in God’s counsel and Plan.

We opt therefore for a reading of John’s Gospel in the light of the entirety of Scripture and not in the questionable atmosphere of post-biblical Greek-influenced dogmatic creeds. Jesus “preexisted” in the mind and purpose of God as the center of the One God’s great design for the salvation of fallen humanity. Jesus, as Peter states, was “foreknown before the foundation of the world” (I Pet. 1:20). But Christians were also foreknown (I Pet. 1:2). John can even say that Jesus was the lamb “crucified before the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8) but no one thinks that the crucifixion happened literally then. It “happened,” as did the whole career of Jesus, and his future glorification, “ideally” or “notionally.” What a supremely beautiful Plan God prepared from the beginning — the Plan which we now recognize as having been unfolded throughout human history.

The professor of New Testament Literature and Interpretation at Chicago Theological Seminary wrote of our John 17:5 passage in 1899:

“Jesus prays for the fruition of his Messianic work, or the reward for that work. It follows that he cannot have possessed that glory with the Father before the foundation of the world, except in the sense that it was his in the purpose and decree of God. Compare Matt. 25:34: “Inherit the Kingdom [a synonym for glory in the New Testament] *prepared for you* by my Father from the foundation of the world.” Rewards are bestowed after the work is done,

and then only can be appreciated as rewards. Jesus possessed this glory [as the disciples yet to be born and converted possessed it, 17:22] before the foundation of the world, in the sense that it was divinely purposed for him. Jesus knew that his Messianic work had been planned by God from eternity, and that the glorious outcome of it had been fixed, and was kept in store for him.

“We conclude then that those passages in John’s Gospel in which Jesus alludes to his preexistence do not involve the claim that his preexistence was personal and real. They are to be classed with the other phenomena of the Messianic consciousness of Jesus, none of which, neither in Matthew, Mark, and Luke or in the fourth Gospel, have to do with metaphysical relationships” (G.H. Gilbert, *The Revelation of Jesus*, London: MacMillan and Co., pp. 221, 222).

We are sorry, therefore, that a small number of our readers have taken up their pens to warn us in the severest tones that I am definitely an “antichrist” promoting a non-Savior. We can only plead that our opposition take a broader look at the literature on this important subject. We also urge that exponents of a traditional Trinitarian Jesus consider how heavily they lean on a few verses in only one of the New Testament gospels, John. And that John is the very one who declared that he wants his readers to be convinced not that “Jesus is God” but that Jesus is the “Messiah and Son of God” (John 20:31). John is also the one who reports that Jesus addressed the Father in typical Jewish fashion as “the only one who is truly God” (John 17:3; 5:44).

Do our readers really hear that statement? The Father alone is the “only True God” and Jesus is by contrast and distinction “Messiah whom the Father sent” (John 17:3). If the Father is the “only one who is truly God,” simple logic and language tell you that Jesus is not “the only true God.” He is the Son of God, the Messiah.

Those interested in investigating questionable theological practices may be interested to know that the celebrated Augustine found John 17:3 impossible to reconcile with what the church had taught him in regard to a triune Godhead. Undaunted he devised a way around the problem that Jesus did not think of himself as the “only true God.” In his *Homilies on John* Augustine restructured the inconvenient words of Jesus as follows: “You Father and Jesus Christ whom you sent, the only true God.”

Such juggling of the words of the Bible has led to untold confusion and disunity amongst Christians. True unity begins with the recognition that there is One God, the Father, the Only True God, and that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel and Savior of the World. ✧

Gnosticism — More than a Present Threat

In a recent article (*Discernment*, May/June 1999, P.O. Box 129, Lapeer, MI 48446), a writer remarks on the pronounced dangers of a Gnostic approach to salvation and Scripture, currently espoused in some “charismatic” circles. The author’s point is that those who rely heavily on “experience” give themselves over to subjectivity and personal feeling uncontrolled by the text of Scripture. They have faith in their own experience rather than in the promises of God.

By “Gnostic” is meant a form of popular religion which originated in New Testament times and probably before. Some “Gnostics” claimed to be Christians and other Christians who opposed them saw the dangers of their allegorical, and often philosophical, approach to the Bible. Gnosticism was a blend of popular spirituality, neo-Platonism and eastern mysticism, producing an attractive “soup” designed to satisfy human spiritual hunger. “Christian” Gnostics simply appended the name of Jesus and Christ to their variety of essentially pagan teachings, and the result seemed to the less well-instructed to be close to the faith of the New Testament. Bible writers often fought the counterfeiting techniques of the Gnostics.

The author, John Marston, who reflects on current Gnostic tendencies (and there are several prominent writers who also see parallels in contemporary Christianity), points out that one Gnostic characteristic is the failure to take plain words at their face value. This tendency has caused the rift which divides the amillennial Christian from the premillennial Christian. There is much truth in this observation. The literal and natural reading of the words of the Bible is the first choice for the wise student. For example, the noun “resurrection” in the New Testament is found some 40 times to mean the resurrection of the literally dead to life, either in the case of Jesus (the only one yet to have been resurrected) or of the faithful of all ages at the return of Jesus to the earth (see I Cor. 15:23). It would therefore be a major mistake of interpretation to

decide that in Revelation 20:5 the noun resurrection *cannot* mean the raising of the literally dead to life again. Yet this is the grave weakness of amillennialism. Amillennialism (readers should not be daunted at all by the technical terms: the ideas involved are very simple) proposes that Satan has already been “bound so that he cannot deceive the nations any longer” (Rev. 20:3) and that the resurrection of the dead mentioned in Revelation 20:5 means the *figurative* resurrection of a person not literally dead, but dead in sin. Such “resurrection,” amillennialism teaches, happens to the individual when he or she is converted. Premillennialism says no. Resurrection, the noun, should mean what it means in some 40 other passages — the actual coming to life of a dead person who has died literally.

If any of our readers is in doubt on this point, he should consult not only the normal meaning of the noun “resurrection” (which never refers to conversion), but the immediate context in Revelation 20:1-6. Here we read plain words, crystal clear information: “Those persons who had been beheaded came to life...This is the first resurrection.” It would be an amazing misunderstanding to argue that “the coming to life” again of “those who had been beheaded” means anything other than what it says: The literally dead came back to life. Such is the strong advantage of the premillennial understanding of this passage. It takes words at their normal, natural face value.

Gnostic tendencies are found today also in the widely held belief that man is a bipartite creature with body and immortal soul and that his “soul” departs consciously to heaven or hell at the moment of death. Thus we hear often that so and so has “gone home to be with Jesus in heaven.” Pleasant as such a view may seem, it has no biblical basis. If we want to grasp the biblical view of life after death, I Thessalonians 4 is among many passages which lays it out clearly. Having described how Jesus “died and rose again,” Paul says that dead Christians will rise from death in the future. When Christ returns, Paul taught, the dead, who he says are now asleep, will be woken up from sleep (the word “raised” is the same in Greek as the word “awaken”), caught up to meet the Lord in the air and “*thus* we shall come to be always with the Lord.”

Did you catch that? “*Thus* we shall always be with the Lord.” In this manner — by this process of being woken up at the future coming of Jesus — we shall come into the presence of Christ. By no other means. Pause and reflect. If it is possible to be “with Christ” *before* the resurrection, Paul would have been wrong to say “*By this means* we shall be with the Lord forever.” The words of Paul, coupled with the words of Jesus in John 5:28, 29 and Daniel in 12:2, tell us with complete clarity that the dead are asleep *until the resurrection day*. When they are raised from death (awoken from the sleep of death) they will then come into the presence of Christ and be with him forever. By resurrection, alone, and not by survival as an “immortal spirit,” we will be ushered into Christ’s presence — for the first time, at the resurrection when Jesus comes back to inaugurate his Kingdom on earth (Matt. 5:5; Rev. 5:10).

Gnostic tendencies affected other major popular Christian doctrines. Origen (died 254 AD) was a philosophically-minded theologian whose allegorical treatment of the Bible caused him to hunt for hidden, so-called “spiritual” meanings which were merely the invention of his own imagination.

Many earnest believers are quite unaware that it was the teaching of the mystically-minded Origen about the “eternal begetting of the Son” which helped to develop the now famous teaching that Jesus is coequal and coeternal with the Father. We strongly urge that Bible students in search of saving Truth examine the roots of some of their central historic teachings. Do they really come from the Bible, or rather from the strong philosophical and Gnostic tendencies which invaded the church soon after the death of the Apostles? Paul warned us, but have we heeded? (Acts 20:28-31; II Tim 4:1ff.)✧

Comments

Thanks so much for your illuminating insights into the origins of some of the popular Christian ideas. We are on the alert now and unwilling to accept a teaching without a thorough investigation and hearing both sides. We are seeing things in the Bible which we never saw before (Michigan).

You have now revealed yourself as an antichrist. You have questioned the doctrine of the Trinity. I would be very careful about daring to do this (Michigan).