

Focus on the Kingdom

Vol. 11 No. 10

Anthony Buzzard, editor

July, 2009

The Great Olivet Discourse of Jesus (Matthew 24)

This article represents generally what would be called a “classical futurist understanding” of Jesus’ and Daniel’s prophecies. The main point is that the Great Tribulation has not yet occurred but that it will, immediately preceding (Matt. 24:29) the Second Coming of Jesus.

The proof that the prophecy in Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21 does not refer ultimately to events in AD 70 is simply that we know that **Jesus did not return immediately after the terrible time of great tribulation (Matt. 24:29) precipitated by the events of AD 70.**

Here the reader is tested. We are to believe Jesus and his claims to be the true spokesman for God. Or was he wrong? This would render his teachings invalid. Christianity involves believing all the words of Jesus, not just the ones we judge to be important!

He predicted cosmic signs and his return *immediately after* (Matt. 24:29) the *end of the one, unique great tribulation*, placed by him *just before* his return, and by Daniel at the end of Daniel’s final vision (12:1). The great tribulation as Daniel predicted it was to be followed by the resurrection of the faithful dead (Dan. 12:1-2). Jesus, basing himself on Daniel, taught the same truth about the final time of trouble, which is short and unrepeatable. **What follows this final burst of trial and tribulation is the return of Jesus and the resurrection of all the faithful of all the ages (1 Cor. 15:23, etc.).** The New Testament calls this the “first resurrection” (Rev. 20:6).

There can logically be only one *unique* Great Tribulation (Matt. 24:21 quoting Dan. 12:1) — just as there is only one unique God, the Father (1 Cor. 8:4-6) and only one uniquely begotten Son of God (Luke 1:32-35; 1 Tim. 2:5), Jesus.

The great tribulation (Dan. 12:1), the death of a final King of the North in the land (Dan. 11:45), the resurrection of the faithful dead to glory (Dan. 12:2) — these are the events of the end-time in which the disciples were intensely interested. They too knew Daniel’s prophecies. Jesus speaks often of the future resurrection of the dead and actually quotes Daniel 12:3 (in Matt. 13:43) as proof of that end-time event. Jesus loved those predictions of Daniel and we should too. We should be prepared to explain them to others, whenever

opportunity arises and whenever we *create* such opportunities!

Jesus refers in exactly the same way as Daniel to the Great Tribulation (Matt. 24:21) and the Abomination of Desolation (Matt. 24:15) which triggers it. These are events which *Daniel* had written about 600 years before the birth of Jesus. Jesus affirms them as prophecies in the same way that he affirms his own identity as the Son of Man (based on Dan. 7:13). He also affirms the Messianic Kingdom predicted by Daniel (Dan. 2:44; 7:14, 18, 22, 27). None of this simple material is affected by the “abomination of desolation” (Jews referred that term to the activity of Antiochus Epiphanes) occurring in the second century BC. One can say that those events and the ones in AD 70 have things in common, but they are not the *ultimate* fulfillments of the events predicted by Daniel and Jesus in Matthew 24. Jesus was talking about the “end of the age,” not about AD 70 — and certainly not about the second century BC!

Once we challenge the right of Jesus to see prediction in Daniel, we challenge his right to base the Gospel on Daniel’s predictions of the coming Kingdom on earth. We challenge likewise Jesus’ confirmation of Daniel’s prediction of the future resurrection, which has never yet happened. Jesus is to be believed, not challenged! Jesus is our master teacher, when it comes to understanding Daniel and the future. Believing in Jesus means listening to his teachings and helping others with those teachings too.

Doing Away with the Future

An attempt is being made in our time to abolish the prophecies of Daniel and of Jesus. It has long been maintained by a school of scholarly endeavor that Daniel did not write the book which has his name. It was written, they say, by some unknown person living at the time of the events associated with the persecutor of the Jews, Antiochus Epiphanes of the second century BC.

There are more subtle ways of assaulting the prophecies of Jesus. One way is to try to detach Jesus’ words from their base in Daniel. But Jesus insists on the link to Daniel. He speaks of the words of Daniel which were faithfully recorded, and Jesus expects them to happen as predicted. “Read the book of Daniel and understand” is the gist of Matthew 24:15. Define the Abomination not just by your history book but by the actual words of Daniel.

Jesus said nothing about Daniel’s prophecies *not* being real predictions. If we take that skeptical approach

we undermine the certainty of those prophecies, cited from Daniel and affirmed by Jesus, of the resurrection, the Kingdom and the existence of the Messiah, the Son of Man (Dan. 7). There is also of course in Daniel a prediction of the *first* coming of the Messiah prince (Dan. 9:24-27). And in the same prophecy we have a forecast of “one who comes desolating [*m’shomem*] on the wing of abominations” (Dan. 9:27). The Hebrew text gives us “he comes desolating.” This wicked person is a single individual. That same wicked prince is said to come “to his end” (9:26b, cp. 11:45) in a future flood of judgment. As Jesus said, these prophecies were of the highest relevance to his followers. They were to know “in advance” (Matt. 24:25).

The words of Jesus are under constant attack from the invisible evil forces who try to lead us away from sound belief. John spoke of those “who are trying to seduce” us (1 John 2:26). Satan’s enterprise is a continuous onslaught on the truth of what Jesus said. It is executed in the most subtle ways, sometimes involving minute points of grammar in Hebrew and Greek. The Christian public is to be always on guard and seeking the best possible help. (In our June magazine we advised against relying on popular internet sites, rather than the proper academic lexical sources, for good information on the meaning of Bible words. *Strong’s Concordance* has its value, of course, but it is not the best tool in some cases. Scholars have learned much about biblical words since the time when Strong’s was written.)

After dealing with the events which would be signs of his future arrival Jesus said: “This generation will not pass until *all these things* have taken place” (Mark 13:30). “All these things” of course refers to the full account he had just given, including the great tribulation, the cosmic signs and the second coming.

Yes, some clergy even gave up believing in Jesus on this text. They resigned their position as church leaders. They were intelligent enough to see that “all these things” did not happen within 40 years, i.e. in AD 70. It was a pity that they did not carefully examine the word translated “generation,” especially in the light of its Hebrew background. Jesus could not have meant what English speakers today might understand by “generation.” When Jesus was later asked in Acts 1:6 about the time of the coming Kingdom, all he needed to say would have been, “I told you: It is all going to happen within the next 40 years”! That is, *if* Jesus meant by *genea*, 40 or 70 years at the most. But he did not.

What Jesus did in fact say was that no one was to know the length of time which would elapse before his return. Therefore he could not have said earlier, “It will all happen within 40 years.” And so it is today. No one knows when Jesus will return. Church history is littered with failed date-setting. This ought to teach us to be

cautious and to avoid the relentless “hype” which may sell books but disturbs the public.

Jesus did give some signs as warning (Matt. 24:14-15) — but no chronological data. Twice in the New Testament the Parousia is expected “after a long time” (Matt. 25:19; Luke 20:9). In other places it is expected “quickly” and “suddenly.” But there is no clear measurement of years. Until we “see the Abomination standing where **he** ought not to” (Mark 13:14; see a good modern commentary and various modern translations, and note the RV, 1881 correction of the KJV, 1611), we must watch and prepare, waiting for the Kingdom, as did Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:43).

Habakkuk, writing long before the birth of Jesus, predicted a *soon-coming end of the age*. “For the vision is for its appointed time, it hastens towards its end and it will not lie; although it may take some time, wait for it, for come it certainly will before too long” (2:3). The New Testament provides inspired commentary when it alludes to these words: “Only a little while now, a very little while, for come he certainly will before too long” (Heb. 10:37).

So centuries before the birth of Jesus, prophets predicted that the end of the age was coming quickly, and the New Testament takes up that same idea and repeats it. Obviously the writers had no problem with this concept of urgent expectancy. The prophets all speak as if their own day is close in time to the Day of the Lord. The prophets live in eager anticipation of the future Kingdom. The point would be that we are never far from the Day of the Lord. We are never far from death, and in the next second of our consciousness, after falling asleep and remaining asleep in death, we will face judgment. The Kingdom will have arrived. Until then we are to watch and wait and get on with our primary Christian task which is the furtherance of Jesus’ project given to us in Matthew 28:19-20, the Great Commission.

“Then know that the Kingdom of God is near”

The words “near” and “approaching” are used in the Bible in connection with the apocalyptic coming of the future Kingdom. “Apocalyptic” describes the spectacular intervention of God in Christ. This will happen at what the Bible calls the “end-time” and the return of the Son of Man. Luke in particular is eager to teach us about that *future* of the all-embracing Kingdom of God, as it supersedes present nation-states and brings into existence the peace on earth we so desperately need (Rev. 11:15-18). The Kingdom of God as it will develop worldwide under the supervision of Jesus and the faithful believers will bring about an idyllic world in which now hostile nations will beat their “swords into plowshares,” their tanks into tractors. War and all the present senseless and mindless killing and sexual license

will be a thing of the past. People will learn to live as they should. “For only when You come to judge the earth will people turn from wickedness and do what is right” (Isa. 26:9). That is not true of today. At present the Devil has a large measure of control over world affairs (2 Cor. 4:4; 1 John 5:19) and the human race has chosen not to pay careful attention to God. The results are obvious.

It was the prospect of the future Kingdom of God which moved the crowds to a fever of excitement. They saw Jesus approaching Jerusalem and they cried out “Blessed be,” or “God’s blessings on the coming Kingdom of our father David” (Mark 11:10). That is the hope of all believers. This is the principal theme of the saving Christian Gospel. We know this because Jesus said so, over and over again. His saving Gospel announcement had the Kingdom as its central topic. (Mark 1:14-15 says it so clearly.)

The Kingdom of God is the world empire foreseen by all the prophets and notably by Daniel in chapter 7, verses 14, 18, 22, 27. These passages in Daniel should be at the forefront of all Christian conversation about the Kingdom, indeed about the Gospel itself. Why? Because the Christian Gospel **is about the Kingdom of God** (Luke 4:43; Mark 1:14-15, etc.).

Looking at instruction on “how to get saved” on the internet (thousands of sites), one hears almost nothing about believing the Gospel of the Kingdom. Confusion over the Gospel is inevitable if there is confusion over the Kingdom of God. You cannot have the Gospel without a clear definition of the Kingdom. Thus Jesus in Mark 4:11-12 makes an intelligent reception of the Gospel/word of the Kingdom (Matt. 13:19) a *condition for repentance and forgiveness*. This point is of startling interest to us. It is worth repeating: Mark 4:11-12 records Jesus as stating the key to proper repentance and thus forgiveness. “He answered them, ‘The mystery of the **Kingdom of God** has been granted to you. But to those outside everything comes in parables so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled: “They see what I do, but they don’t perceive its meaning.” **They hear my words, but they don’t understand. So they will not turn from their sins and be forgiven**”’ (Mark 4:11-12; see NLT for verse 12). If they *did* understand the Kingdom Gospel they would repent and be forgiven.

In the mind of Jesus an acceptance of his Kingdom of God Gospel is the prerequisite and condition for genuine forgiveness. Many think that the Gospel is *just* about accepting the atoning death of Jesus and his resurrection. But that is only a part (and a vital part) of the Gospel. Jesus in Mark 4:11-12 makes it clear that understanding and accepting the Kingdom of God Gospel is necessary so that we can “repent and be forgiven.” If we do not receive intelligently the Kingdom of God, we cannot repent and we will not be

forgiven. Mark understood this well, as did all the NT writers. Mark puts this caption over the whole of his writing: He introduces Jesus with the announcement — Jesus’ first and fundamental command: “Repent and believe the Gospel about the Kingdom of God” (Mark 1:14-15). Readers are invited to ask themselves if they have repented of failure to understand the Kingdom of God, and now intend to embrace the Kingdom message as a basis for forgiveness. The teaching of Jesus about the Kingdom includes of course a long discourse about events which will precede that coming of the Kingdom in power and glory at the return of Jesus. This information is found three times over, in Matt. 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21. Jesus focuses on trouble in the Middle East and especially in Israel.

As standard commentaries and Bible dictionaries report: “The desolation of Judea and cosmic catastrophes [darkening of the sun, etc.] will announce the dawn of the end of the age (Luke 21:20ff).”¹ Then come these tremendous words of Jesus, as he reaches the climax of his amazing final discourse on the Second Coming: “**So when you see these things happening know that the Kingdom of God is near**” (Luke 21:31). “When these things begin to take place...**your redemption is drawing near**” (Luke 21:28). “The events referred to in Mark 13:30, par. Matt. 24:34 and Luke 21:32 have generally been taken to refer to cosmic events associated with the **second coming** of Christ” (p. 38).

Parousia is the Greek word for the future coming of Jesus in glory to establish his Kingdom on earth. The view taken “generally” (cited above) is the obvious one required by the ordinary and natural use of words. Jesus had been asked in Matthew 24:3 about the end of the age and his Parousia. The important fact to note here is that the Parousia and the end of the age are the same event. This is easily understood in English versions, but the Greek text emphasizes even more the close connection of the coming and the end of the age.

The end of the age and the Parousia did *not* happen in AD 70. A completely misleading view of the Second Coming is now being widely promoted in preterist websites and books. Preterism (“past-ism”) is the name of the teaching which proposes that the second coming and thus the resurrection of the faithful happened in AD 70.

If one believes that Jesus returned in AD 70, this would mean that the marvelous resurrection of the faithful dead (Dan. 12:2; Isa. 26:19; 1 Cor. 15:43) is *already past history!* It would mean that the Kingdom of God has already appeared worldwide. It would mean

¹ *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 2, p. 54.

that the last trumpet signaling the resurrection (Rev. 11:15-18) has already been blown!

The New Testament constantly tells us that the Kingdom of God will be inaugurated worldwide only when Jesus comes back. To imagine that the Kingdom of God came when Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70 is to demonstrate a tragic misunderstanding of the word Kingdom of God and thus *of the Gospel itself*. The Kingdom of God is defined by the book of Daniel and other OT prophets, and Jesus thought of the Kingdom as the great event of his future coming (Parousia).

This timetable of events is established with complete certainty by Daniel's visions of the future history of the world. It is only when the last of the four great Gentile kingdoms are defeated and destroyed that the Kingdom of God will take their place (Dan. 2:44). The Kingdom will come at a specific time: "*the time came* when the saints possessed the Kingdom" (Dan. 7:22). It is when the little horn, the final antichrist figure, is put out of commission by being destroyed (7:11) that the Kingdom of God will be given to the saints of the Most High and "all nations will serve and obey them," that is, those saints (see Dan. 7:27 in the NLT, JPS, RSV and NRSV translations).

It should be perfectly obvious that this is not the situation now. The Christian saints are mostly dead and buried and are thus not ruling the world! It is only at the future resurrection, at the time of the future coming of Jesus, that the saints of all the ages will be brought to life, made alive again by resurrection (John 5:28-29). Then they will be given the privilege as immortalized human beings of ruling and reigning with Jesus in that first stage (the millennium) of the Kingdom of God.

Luke 21:31 reports Jesus as stating: "When you see these things happening, then know that the Kingdom of God is near." It is clear that until you "see these things happening" the Kingdom of God is not near. If you have not seen these things happen, then keep waiting until you (or your children) *do* see them, and then we can say with Jesus "the Kingdom of God is near," in the sense he intended in Luke 21:31.

What are "these things" or as Matthew reports (24:33) "*all* these things which are to be witnessed" as sure signs of the impending Second Coming and Kingdom? *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* gives us the facts: "The desolation of Judea and cosmic catastrophes will announce the dawn of the end of the age." Another author in the same dictionary notes the important fact that **Matthew "has closely linked the "end of Jerusalem" and "the end of the world" (p. 37).**

How can we be certain of this important fact? The close association of trouble in Jerusalem and the end of the age is shown by the form of the question in Matthew 24:3: "Tell us, when will this happen [the ruin of the

temple] and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?" It is shown also, says the *Dictionary* rightly, "**with particular clarity by Matthew's expression 'immediately' after in 24:29.**"

This is the verse which deserves careful scrutiny by Bible readers wanting to share Jesus' view of the future. Jesus' account of future events associated with his return is straightforward and clear. The time markers (in bold below) emphasize the connection between the events and are easily understood (or should be!). Jesus was responding, we remember, to the question "What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?" Jesus stated that the end of the age (v. 14) would occur "**when** you see the Abomination of the Desolation spoken of by Daniel standing in a holy place [Mark 13:14 says "where **he** ought not to"]. **Then** flee...for **then** there will be great tribulation [Dan. 12:1] such has never been since the beginning of the world and never again will be...**Immediately after the tribulation of those days**, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. **At that time** the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matt. 24:15-31).

We suggest that this plain narrative of events is unmistakably clear. This has not prevented however an endless variety of "interpretations," which are often nothing less than an avoidance of the ordinary meaning of words. The phrase "immediately after" could not be clearer. Jesus' language is tightly constructed, allowing for no possibility of ambiguity. It is extraordinary to read in some commentary how hard these words are for some. It was suggested to me recently by a good friend that the words "immediately after the tribulation of those days" really mean "immediately after the *beginning* of the tribulation" or "some 90 years into the time of the great tribulation." But no one else could extract that meaning from the words! Does "immediately after lunch" mean "immediately after the beginning or middle of lunch"? If it did words have ceased to have coherence. The only hope of unity is around plain words, understood in a natural fashion (allowing of course for some Hebrew idioms and word usage).

Having announced the future as involving trouble in Jerusalem and the temple, Jesus said, "When you see all these things know that he is near, at the gates. Truly I tell you that this generation will not pass away before all these things happen" (Matt. 24:33-34). Enormous struggle has arisen from this verse. If "generation" is

taken to mean within 40 or 70 years, then clearly Jesus was quite wrong. The skeptics charge him with false prophecy. But they fail to take into consideration that later, in Acts 1:7 Jesus deliberately told the disciples, “**It is not for you to know the time [fixed points of time] and seasons**” in regard to his return. Imagine now how strange that would be if Jesus had earlier said to them, “I am coming back within one generation.” The two concepts would be in direct contradiction. How then are we to explain “this generation will not pass” before the Kingdom comes?

Two suggestions should be ruled out as unnatural. Jesus did not say “this nation (the Jews) will not pass away.” The word **genea** (pronounced in modern Greek *yennayah*) does not mean nation which is *genos* (*yennos*) in Greek. Even less likely is the suggestion that Jesus meant “that (future) generation will not pass away.” Jesus said “this generation,” not “that generation.”

The key here lies in the very Hebrew meaning of the word “generation.” It is always a fatal mistake to disregard the Hebrew environment of the words of Jesus. It is wooden and unskilled just to hear words in our 21st-century English sense, at least in the cases of technical terms like “generation.” In Psalm 12:7 David wrote these comforting words: “You, O Lord, will watch us; You will guard us from this generation forever. On every side the wicked prow!” (translation following the *Word Biblical Commentary* on Psalms, p. 136). *The New International Dictionary* senses the meaning of “generation” in its Hebrew sense: “In these passages the demonstrative ‘this generation’ has a pejorative character, that is the reference is to a class of people who stand over against the children of light and are further described [by Jesus] as faithless (Mark 9:19) and ‘faithless and perverse’ (Matt. 17:17), adulterous (Mark 8:38), evil and adulterous (Matt. 12:39) and evil (Luke 11:29) and crooked (Acts 2:40).”

When Peter urged his audience to rescue themselves from “this crooked generation” (Acts 2:40) his message extends to us who are living far beyond his time. The word “generation” carries the sense of “faithless brood,” class, kind, or society. A leading German commentator translates as “this sort.” “Generation” denotes a class of people bound in this case by a common evil disposition.

Jesus referred to the people of the present generation and age as “adulterous” and “sinful.” Britain’s leading professor of New Testament at Cambridge caught the sense of “generation” when he wrote: “It is best taken in the sense of ‘age,’ period of time, which is the primary meaning of Hebrew [equivalent word] *dor*. ‘This generation’ is contrasted by Jesus with the time ‘when the Son of Man comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels’ and is roughly equivalent to ‘in this time’ (Mark 10:20) which is contrasted with ‘in the coming

age.’ The time meant by generation is ‘the time before the Second Coming’...The thought of men living in it and of their character is also present and prominent” (Moule in his commentary on the Greek text of Mark).

This meaning of *genea* is found equally in Proverbs 30:11: “There is a **generation** that curses their father and does not bless their mother.” The sense, as other translations capture it, is “group of people,” “kind.” “A wicked generation judge themselves to be just.” “There is a group which is pure in its own eyes.” “There is a kind — how lofty are their eyes!” “There is a generation whose teeth are as swords” (30:12-14). Jesus used the same word in this sense in Luke 16:8: “The people of this age are more shrewd in dealing with the people of their own kind [= **generation**] than the people of light.” “Their own kind” here translates the word “generation.” This does not mean a group restricted to 40 or 70 years. It has to do with the character of people taken as a whole. Society is fundamentally flawed and evil until the return of Jesus. Then “the god of this age” (Satan, 2 Cor. 4:4) will be put out of office and a very different quality of life will characterize society.

It is possible to make Jesus contradict himself! We are very unwise if we imagine such a thing. If we understand him to have set a limit on the Second Coming of one period of 40 or 70 years, we make him contradict his later statement that he, the Son of God, *did not know* when he was coming back (Mark 13:32). This confession of ignorance of course alerts the reader to the fact that Jesus was not the omniscient God! God does not say “I do not know.” But Jesus did. The tangled arguments of some to avoid this simple and obvious fact about the Son’s ignorance are exhausting and confused.

But Jesus in Acts 1:7 expressly set no limit at all on the date of his future coming. It is not for us to know “the times and seasons” which God the Father has set within His own authority. That is crystal clear and means that Jesus had not earlier said, “I am coming back within 40 or 70 years.”

There are indications, too in the NT that the church expected that he would return “after a long time” (Matt. 25:19; Luke 20:9). The early Christians did not (at least early on) expect 2000 years or more to pass before the return of Jesus! But on the other hand they confessed the same ignorance as Jesus about the date and time. And Peter at the end of the NT period was content to answer the scoffers and skeptics by pointing out that a day can be measured as a thousand years from God’s vantage point.

Bible students have rather constantly brought reproach on the name of Jesus by setting dates. Does the public know that Jehovah’s Witnesses and their related “Bible Students” repeated over and over the error of setting a given year for the return of Jesus. The Adventist movement under William Miller made the

colossal mistake of predicting the Second Coming for 1844. The calculation was based on what would now seem a ridiculous manipulation of biblical texts. The failed dates which litter the history of churches cause some to doubt the faith. And the skeptics have a field day. Whisenant's *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988* made the author lots of money. But is Jesus pleased with such misguided "zeal"?

It is much wiser to stay grounded in the actual words of Jesus, when he announced, in answer to the question about the Parousia and the end of the age (Matt. 24:3), "When you see the abomination of desolation standing in a holy place as prophesied earlier by Daniel..." Mark clarifies the same words by giving us "When you see the Abomination of Desolation standing where **he** ought not to." Mark's **he** defines the Abomination as a single person. This should put to rest speculations about series of religious leaders spanning centuries. Certainly there have been evil leaders, but the abomination of desolation is a single figure. Jesus will destroy an individual Man of Sin at his Parousia, not a series of figures spanning the centuries (2 Thess. 2:8).

It was John who wrote "You have heard that Antichrist is coming" (1 John 2:18). He went on to warn that there were already many antichrists on the scene. However he did not retract his own statement that "you have heard that Antichrist is coming." Mickelsen says wisely in his classic book on *Bible Interpretation*: "The interpreter must be careful not to distort the meaning of Scripture. Timothy was commanded to exercise great care in handing the authoritative message: 'Make every effort to present yourself approved [by test] to God, a workman who does not need to be ashamed rightly handling the message of truth'...The passage urges a careful handling of the various elements of the message of truth as one puts them together and proclaims that message" (p. 4). "In 1 John 2:18 some might assume that 'many antichrists' implies there is to be no personal, individual Antichrist. But this was not John's thought. His readers had been taught that the antichrist is coming. This is what they heard. To show that this was no vague generality, John adds 'even now many antichrists have come.' He looks at the plurality of antichrists — those who deny that Jesus is the Messiah and therefore put themselves unequivocally against Christ — as proof of the eventual emergence of one supreme foe of Christ. The antichrist who was already present and who was *the* liar was in his day much like the later model except that the latter will have greater power and destructiveness. In attitude they share the same outlook and make the same response" (p. 373). Indeed the pervasive lie is the one which denies the status and identity of Jesus as the human Messiah. On the rock understanding of Peter that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God (Matt. 16:16-18, not "God the Son"!), the Church was founded. ♪

Thinking about the Doctrine of the Trinity

Very few sermons are preached on the doctrine of the Trinity. As long as a congregant is willing to say "Jesus is God," he is probably in good standing with other church members. But a significant and growing minority are troubled by the proposition "Jesus is God." It sounds odd, not only because Jesus, who knew who he was, never said "I am God." And he said that as Son of God he did not know the day of his coming (Mark 13:32). The statement "I am God" would have been heard in his environment as "I am Yahweh," the God of Israel. The idea would have been rightly rejected as impossible, given what the Hebrew Bible said about God and the Messiah, God's Son, whom the One God was one day going to bring into existence *as the descendant of David* (2 Sam. 7:14-16; Ps. 2:7). Everyone knew that GOD cannot *come into* existence!

Ordinary readers of the Scripture did not need to be taught that God has no beginning. Therefore if the Son of God, the Messiah, was prophesied to be **begotten** (Ps. 2:7, cited of the birth of Jesus in Acts 13:33, not KJV; Heb. 1:5-6), he is disqualified from being the unbegotten God. Begetting tells us he would be *coming into existence*. He could not possibly *be* God, the God of Israel, whose personal name was Yahweh. Yahweh was never begotten, but the Son of God was.

People were able to reason easily from the facts. The Scriptures taught them that Yahweh was alone. There was no one like Him, no God before or after Him. He was exclusive and there was only one of His class. He was unrivalled. The numeral one (*echad* in Hebrew) counted up how many He was. "The Lord our God is one [not two or three!] Yahweh." Jesus quoted that very proposition in Mark 12:29, stressing its enormous importance. One Yahweh could not be two. One means "a **single one**" and Yahweh was described by every form of the language available to express the idea that He was a *single* Divine Person. He was said to be the Father of Israel. "Do we not all have one Father; do we not all have one God?" (Mal. 2:10). In this very satisfying and easy Hebrew parallelism, as it is called, the one God is the same as the one Father.

Into this very health-giving and calming, unifying proposition about the uncreated God, there entered a flood of confusion and complexity. This happened after the time of the New Testament. From the time of the church councils, the concept of God was anything but simple. It required a learned use of special language even to express the idea of who God is. He was declared after centuries of lamentable controversy, excommunication and argument to be a God who **exists as one Essence, but three equal Persons**. This is the caption to which one commits oneself if one attends

almost every church. “God is one Essence existing in three Persons.” That is plainly *not* what Jesus believed. If one is attracted to the teaching of Jesus and his marvelously lucid and life-changing instruction, one is able to see that “The Lord our God is one Lord” (Mark 12:29) does not agree with “Our God is one Essence in three Persons.”

It is a matter of setting the two definitions together and deciding (and teaching our children) which statement sounds like and therefore represents Jesus. Which statement wins Jesus’ approval now and later, when as believers we are assessed for our loyalty to the Messiah?

If someone says “I believe Jesus is God” or “I believe Jesus is Yahweh,” we may gently respond by saying that on the basis of our common language, “If Jesus is God and we know the Father is God, that makes two Gods. If Jesus is Yahweh and the Father is Yahweh that makes two Yahwehs.” This is certain as the nose on our faces. “This is a dog and that is a dog,” pointing to two distinct animals, makes two dogs.

Are we really convinced that the Bible was given us as an absolutely inscrutable language problem? The fact is that we human beings have made the simple (and I think beautiful and restful) into a nightmare of complexity. Ask your friends to explain how God is one and three at the same time. Can they do it?

The finest evangelical scholars of our day are candid enough to admit that they do not understand it. Millard Erickson in his defense of the Trinity says that the best logicians have not been able to explain in what sense God is one and in what other sense He is three (p. 258). Erickson admits that one has to garble ordinary language to get the Trinitarian idea over. “Thus I have sometimes said of the Trinity, ‘He are three’ or ‘They is one.’ For we have here a being whose nature falls outside our usual understanding of persons” (p. 270).

But note carefully that God’s own description of Himself positively does *not* fall outside our usual understanding of persons and personal pronouns! God has graciously chosen to reveal Himself in clear language. It is one of humanity’s great disasters that churches, following tradition, have obscured the identity of God, overlaying the biblical simplicity with a haze and fog of unintelligible jargon.

We would urge our readers to obtain (second-hand?) Michael Durrant’s *Theology and Intelligibility* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973). His conclusion is that “no intelligible account can be offered of the Trinitarian formula and hence of the doctrine of the Trinity” (p. 195). As an example of unintelligibility, despite noble struggle, to which Durrant refers, one may consult James White’s *The Forgotten Trinity*. Trinitarians will sometimes say that the Trinity cannot be *comprehended*, and so unintelligibility is to be

expected. Dr. White is honest when he admits that our language is somehow inadequate to define how many and who God is. God is said to be one Being existing as three coequal and coeternal persons (p. 26). White admits to his own struggle: “We struggle to express ourselves clearly here, for how does one describe the Being of God?” (p. 169). The problem is that White offers two non-compatible definitions. God, he says, *is* one Being. Then he speaks of “the Being of God,” “God’s being,” “His essence,” which is a *quality* of God.

White says that the God of the Bible is one “What” not a “Who.” Do readers of the Bible really find in its pages a Being who is a “what” and not a “who”? Does the masculine pronoun “he” used of God over and over again in Scripture mean that God is a “What”? The problem is that White used language in a way quite foreign to the Bible’s much easier description of the identity of God.

Can you explain on the basis of the Bible or your own use of words the difference between “person” and “being”? Later White tells us: “Don’t think of ‘begotten’ in human terms, but in divine terms” (p. 172). But the Bible does not say that “begotten” does not mean “begotten,” and that someone begotten has no beginning! This would be equivalent to saying, “Don’t think of black as black, but as yellow.” You see, a whole vocabulary of “non-language” has to be imported before one can discuss these abstruse issues about who God and Jesus are.

Dr. White ends in contradiction. He tries to convince Jehovah’s Witnesses of the Trinity: “So I press on. ‘I assume you agree with me that there is only one true God, Yahweh... I believe the name Yahweh refers to the very divine Being, the eternal God, **who** created everything [note that White’s one ‘What’ is now a ‘Who’]” (p. 132). White has thus defined the triune God, the Being, the What as Yahweh. Now he goes on: “We can agree, I assume, that the Father is identified as Yahweh. But I believe that the Bible identifies Jesus as Yahweh, as well, and the spirit is the spirit of Yahweh [or does he mean *is* Yahweh?] Each of these three *persons* shares the one divine name, Yahweh.”

So now we are asked to believe that the one Essence, Being, the “one What” is Yahweh, and at the same time Jesus is *identified* as Yahweh, and the spirit also. Here James White has run into a clear contradiction. Yahweh is the name of the one What and also the name of each of the Persons. So one Yahweh = three Yahwehs. That cannot be. 3x cannot equal 1x. ✧

Comments

“Thank you! I finished reading my first issue of *Focus on the Kingdom*. It was very informative. I’m going to order Mr. Buzzard’s book *The Doctrine of the Trinity*. Again thank you and I hope you will continue to send your magazine.” — *California*