

Focus on the Kingdom

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An Immortal Longing

by Carlos Xavier

The Apostle Paul warns his readers not to “receive a *different spirit* from the one you received nor to put up with a *different gospel* from the one you *accepted*...because even if we *or an angel from heaven* should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be *accursed [anathema]*...for *even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light*” (2 Cor. 11:4, 14; Gal. 1:8). The Apostle John likewise exhorts his readers not to “believe every spirit, but *test the spirits* to see whether they are from God,” since by testing “those who call themselves apostles *and are not*, we may find them to be false” (1 John 4:1-6; Rev. 2:2).

The purpose of this article is to invite the reader to further search and examine the Scriptures with a “Berean” spirit (Acts 17:11; Isa. 34:16), in order to “fight the good fight of the faith,” so that we might be able to “take hold of the eternal life” (in the coming age) — life that *awaits us* (1 Tim. 6:12). As Christians, founded on Peter’s confession that Jesus is the “Son of God” (Matt. 16:13-20) and *not* God the Son, we should not be afraid to question what we have been taught¹ or whatever personal experience (no matter how vivid and real)² we may have had in our lives. And although space may not allow me to fully tackle all the passages used by those who believe in the immortality of the soul³ (i.e. grasping at a single Parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Luke 16:19-31), my aim is to prove not only how the misleading concept of the immortal soul contradicts the Gospel message. I want to show also how it is a stumbling block to our taking “hold of the eternal life” as promised by God.

¹I.e. wrongly as in this false statement: “The doctrine of the faith affirms that the *spiritual and immortal soul* is created immediately by God” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Sec. 2, Ch. 1, Art. 1, Par. 6, Man, 2,366,382; Art. 12.4.1035, 1992).

“The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: (Gen 3:19; Acts 13:36) but their souls, which *neither die nor sleep*, having an *immortal subsistence*, immediately return to God who gave them: (Lu 23:43; Eccl 12.7)” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 32.1, 1646AD).

²“Doctor says near-death experiences are in the mind” CNN

³ The Bible presents the soul as the *whole, individual person* and not a separate part of him. This counters the wrong interpretation of 1 Thess. 5:23: “Your whole *spirit and soul and body*,” where Paul is simply using several terms to describe *one and the same entity* for greater emphasis.

“The assumption that John dispenses with [a literal] future resurrection [of the dead] would mean that he has *significantly altered* the view of ‘resurrection’ found elsewhere in the documents of the NT or in the Judaism of the period⁴ [where] the dead are raised, not ‘spiritually’ or metaphorically, *but bodily*...The data of the gospel [of John] do not bear out the assumption that John has collapsed the future resurrection into a present quality of life, *even a divinely given life*...Language about being raised up remains resolutely attached to the future, to the ‘last day’...thus bringing to fruition what the Father offers through the Son, *the gift of life*.”⁵

The belief the writer refers to here is the one founded on the prophetic visions described by Daniel 12:2 and Isaiah 26:19, where a literal *reanimation* of dead bodies by the power of God’s spirit is in view. This *unchanging understanding* at the center of what ultimately the Gospel message promises, eternal life to be attained *only* in the future Kingdom of God, is maintained by Peter at Pentecost in Acts 2:29-35:

“Brothers and sisters, *we all know* that the patriarch David *died* and was *buried* and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a *prophet* and knew that *God had promised* him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. *Seeing what was to come*, he spoke of the *resurrection* of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay...For David *did not ascend to heaven*, and yet he said, ‘The Lord [YHWH] said to my lord [*adoni*, human superior]: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’” (TNIV).

A closer look at this key passage reveals that not only Peter knew of David’s death (described as sleep by Paul) *but everyone else* within earshot was also aware of this fact. But, like Daniel, David was also a prophet who saw “*what was to come...the resurrection from the dead* of the Messiah,” a sort of *prelude* to the core promises that the Gospel message of the Kingdom of God only can provide. So what does this mean? *No one*, including prophets, patriarchs or kings, is said to be currently alive, conscious and active in heaven, where only Jesus is at the present, because he is the “*firstfruits* [first to rise from the dead] of those who have fallen asleep [*dead*]” (1 Cor. 15:20-23; cp. Acts 26:23).

⁴ Cp. Gen 2:17; 3:19-22; Job 7:21; 34:14-15; Ecc. 12:7; Psa. 6:15; 13:3; 30:9; 88:10-15; 103:14; 104:29; 115:17; Job 10:18-19; Jer. 51:39; Ezek. 18:4, 20; Ecc. 3:19-20; 9:5, 10.

⁵ Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John*, 2001, p. 82-83.

“**1Cor 15:20**: If God raised Christ from the dead, then Christ truly was the **firstfruits** (Ex. 23:19; Lev. 23:10; Deut. 18:4; Neh. 10:35) or the first of many others *who would also be* raised from the dead. (See also Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:23; Col. 1:18.) The term ‘firstfruits’ (Gk. *aparchē*) refers to a first sample of an agricultural crop that indicates the nature and quality of the rest of the crop; therefore, Christ’s resurrection body gives a *foretaste* of what those of believers *will be like*” (ESV study notes).⁶

If this isn’t clear enough for the reader, Paul reiterates Peter’s message: “When David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell *asleep* [*died*]; he was buried with his ancestors and his body *decayed*” (Acts 13:36). The second part of this verse is sometimes translated “slept with his fathers.” When you do a “phrase count” you will discover that *all of the kings registered* in the books of 1 and 2 Kings (cp. Chronicles) are said to have died and been laid to rest with their fathers, from Solomon to Jehoiakim — *all of them!*⁷

In a beautifully composed piece of poetry, Job mentions this fact when, in his distress, he wishes he had joined all who were already in this *state of rest* (and not enjoying the glories of heaven) rather than being born:

“Had I died at birth, I would *now* be at peace. I would be *asleep and at rest*. I would rest with the *world’s kings* and prime ministers, whose great buildings now lie in ruins. I would *rest with princes*, rich in gold, whose palaces were filled with silver. Why wasn’t I buried like a stillborn child, like a baby who never lives to see the light? For *in death* the wicked cause no trouble, and the weary are *at rest*. Even captives are at ease *in death*, with no guards to curse them. Rich and poor are both there, and the slave is free from his master” (Job 3:13-19, NLT).

If not one of the kings is *presently alive* and conscious in the heavens (or under it), we have to surmise from Paul’s message that the same applies to the “fathers” of David, those patriarchs who came before him. How do we know? The Old Testament testifies that Abraham was laid with his “fathers in peace” (Gen. 15:15; 25:8), the same for Isaac and Jacob (Gen. 47:28-31), Moses (Deut. 31:14-15; 34:5), King David and his son Solomon (2 Sam. 7:12; 1 Kings 2:10; 11:21; cp.

⁶ Warning: As good as most biblical commentaries are, they also err on this point. The ESV commentary for the following verse (1 Cor 1:23) reads: “Until that time, those who have died *exist in heaven as spirits without bodies*”!

⁷ 1 Kings 11:21; 14:20; 15:8; 16:6; 22:40; 2 Kings 8:24; 10:35; 13:9; 14:16; 13:7; 16:20; 20:21; 21:18; 24:6; cp. 2 Chron. 9:31; 12:16; 14:1; 16:13.

2Chron. 9:21). The New Testament again verifies the *unchanging nature* of their current state:

“All these people were still living by faith when they *died*. They *did not receive the things promised*; they only *saw them and welcomed them from a distance* [via prophetic utterances and covenantal promises]...Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (Heb. 11:13-15, TNIV).

The reformer Martin Luther, though this is not widely known, considered the doctrine of the “immortality of the soul” to be a pagan superstition introduced by Roman Catholicism. Luther went on record as saying: “I think there is not a place in the Scripture of more force [than Ecc. 9:5] for the dead that have fallen into sleep, understanding nothing of our state and condition, against the invocation of saints and the fiction of purgatory.” In 1524 Luther preached about the soul sleeping until the resurrection and was attacked for his “sleep of the dead” doctrine by Britain’s Sir Thomas More. But Calvin was vehemently against the sleep of the dead:

“This verse [Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,’ Acts 7:59] *clearly testifies that the soul of man is not a vanishing breath* [does not die], according to the ravings of some madmen, but that it is an *essential spirit, and survives death*” (Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*).

The wrong view had been supported by two leading church fathers. Tertullian, c. AD 208: “We define the soul as born of the breath of God, *immortal*” (*The Soul*, 22:2). Gregory of Nyssa, c. AD 360-394: “*Pagan philosophy* says that the *soul is immortal*. This is a pious [good] offspring [teaching]” (*Life of St. Moses*, 2:40).

Alas, the simple truth did not win out. So I ask you, faithful reader, why allow this invasion from paganism to diminish the biblical emphasis on “the last day” and judgment itself — a judgment which, according to Paul, will affect him too (Rom. 14:10).⁸ What meaning, if any, do we give to the *explicit commandments* of the Lord Jesus Christ?

“Whoever believes in the Son *has eternal life*; whoever does not *obey the Son shall not see life*, but the wrath of God remains on him...I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, *even though he dies*, yet *shall he live*, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” (John 3:36; 11:25-26, ESV). There is no way out of death *apart from the resurrection* when Jesus comes back. **Is this your belief?** ✧

⁸ “Rom. 14:10-12: everyone will stand before God, who will judge all on the last day. The future day of judgment is prophesied in Isa. 45:23. Every person will give an account of his life to God at the judgment” (ESV study note).

The Bewildering, Contradictory Claims as to What the Bible Teaches

The Bible reader who sincerely desires to discover the will of God, to understand what God has revealed in Scripture, is faced with a daunting task. A veritable jungle of differing teachings confronts him as he considers the thousands of denominational options available in the “church marketplace.”

It is hard for us who produce *Focus on the Kingdom* to believe the Bible is responsible for such a smorgasbord of conflicting points of view. About 10%, probably, of first-century Jews and Gentiles were literate. They relied on what they heard preached and taught by word of mouth. Certainly the Hebrew Scriptures were read weekly in the synagogue, and the intrepid Paul was believed, by virtue of his extraordinary apostolic office, to be writing Scripture (2 Pet. 3:16).

But does the Scripture present its teachings so poorly and unclearly as to warrant the amazing fragmentation we find today? Denominations are testimony to the appearance of distinct denominational leaders, who invite their followers to distance themselves from other Christian groups, in the interest of promoting the “correct” understanding of God’s will in Scripture.

At your door are earnest Jehovah’s Witnesses claiming to possess a unique point of view vested in the Watchtower organization (*Awake* magazine). Adherents believe the Watchtower to be God’s only genuine promoter of divine truth. Twenty million Seventh-Day Adventists, holding in high regard their founder Ellen G. White’s vision of the fourth (the Sabbath) command (lit up), insist that the test commandment of the ten is the observance of Saturday as the Sabbath. Many think (wrongly) that churches meeting on Sunday have ignorantly fallen for the dreaded “mark of the Beast.”

Roman Catholics see in the Pope an infallible guide to truth. The Pope is thought to be the sole authorized successor to the apostle Peter. Their elaborate system of veneration of Mary as intercessor in heaven offers comfort to millions who strongly believe that Mary, “the mother of God,” aids them in their daily struggles.

Believers in conditional immortality are convinced about what they hold is plain scriptural teaching, that Mary and all the dead are currently unconscious, sleeping the sleep of death (Ps. 13:3; Ecc. 9:5, 10), until they awake in the future resurrection (Dan. 12:2; Luke 14:14). The dead then will reemerge as whole persons, wakened from their sleep of death, only when the seventh trumpet sounds at Jesus’ return (Rev. 11:15-18).

Mormons are no less enthusiastic about their conviction that their prophet Joseph Smith was the vehicle of extra revelation, in addition to the Bible, and

they find this in the Book of Mormon and other writings. Their teachings include the notion that God has several wives and that God was a man before becoming God.

So called “non-denominational” churches are not really that. They claim no label like “Baptist” or “Methodist” but their belief system is very similar to any of the fundamentalist churches, such as Baptists. They sometimes insist that the King James Bible is the only reliable testimony to the will of God.

Pentecostals are discontent with what they see in the various denominations and, whether Assemblies of God or the United Pentecostal Church, claim a second level of Christian experience which they label “the baptism in the Holy Ghost” (finding comfort in the King James language: “ghost” = spirit). Though not all Pentecostals feel that this “experience,” usually associated with a claim to “speak in tongues,” makes the rest of Christendom invalid, nevertheless the independent existence of the various Pentecostal denominations proves that they feel in some important way separate from other forms of the faith.

An umbrella teaching common to many of the groups so far mentioned is the conviction that the real badge of authenticity is the belief that the God of the Bible and the universe is a triune Being, a Godhead known as the Trinity. This ancient teaching held in common by both Protestants and Roman Catholics finds in the Bible Jesus’ claim to “be God,” a full member of the Deity who is one essence in three Persons.

But Jehovah’s Witnesses are vigorous opponents of this Trinitarian idea of God and door to door promote the teaching that Jesus was originally the archangel Michael. This view of Jesus sets them apart from their fellow non-Trinitarians, the United Pentecostal Church, who claim that the Father and the Son are the same one God, a single Person. Their understanding is known as the “Oneness” view of God.

Within the so-called Bible churches there are differences of “interpretation” about the future destiny of Christians. Held in common, however, is the conviction that the “wicked” are now being and will continue to be tormented consciously forever and ever. Little attempt is made to reconcile this horrifying teaching with the God of compassion presented in the Bible. At the scholarly level an occasional protest is heard, but the almost irresistible power of “what we are all supposed to believe” and “our trained pastors could not be wrong,” means that a serious review of “eternal torment” never seems to surface.

The New Testament is clear in its disapproval of the major denominational differences we have outlined. “I wish above all things,” Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers, “that you all say the same thing, that you be perfectly united in one mind and one judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10). Jesus had prayed that his followers all be “one,”

as Father and Son are one in harmonious agreement (John 17:11). What became of that prayer? It seems not to accord with the patent absence of unity within Christendom. Thousands of Christian groupings, all separately labeled, meet in isolation from differing forms of the faith, and maintain a sense of coherence by concentrating on what makes them different from other denominations.

What sense can we make of all this? Some of us found ourselves disenchanted with the denominational affiliation into which we were born. We were thus launched on a fascinating journey of faith as we tried to sort out the myriad differences found in the various groups claiming Jesus' name. Trinity or non-Trinity? The dead in heaven and hell now, or resting unconscious in their graves? Could Jesus return *at any moment* and remove the faithful from the earth in a secret pre-tribulation rapture, or will Jesus return just once to resurrect the dead and inaugurate his Kingdom on earth? Or will the Kingdom not be on earth at all, but rather in a celestial location? And what is the Gospel?

With the past 50 years behind me, in which I have been privileged for many years to teach in a small Bible college, I present the following suggestions as to where the truth lies. Readers are urged to ponder these important issues.

Who is God? Is the answer to this question really so fearfully complex? Does it warrant those centuries of agonizing dispute, until the "problem" was finally resolved at the celebrated Council of Nicea in 325 AD, the event which gave rise to the often unchallenged belief that God is three Persons in one essence?

Suppose for a moment that Truth resides in a few clear, plain and simple propositions. Suppose that it was the avoidance of the plain and simple Bible propositions which led inevitably to confusion and diversity.

Try this for a supremely beautiful and easy statement defining God: "You, Father," Jesus said, "are the only one who is truly God" (John 17:3). Can anyone else be "truly God," if the Father of Jesus is "the only one who is truly God"? The Greek of the Bible gives us these lucid words: The Father is the "*MONOS* [only, unique] *alethinos* [true, genuine] *THEOS* [God]." Do you see here the roots of our English word "monotheism," which summarizes the fundamental appeal of the Bible to avoid any God but the one true God?

Look again. Who did Jesus believe was that "one true God" of monotheism? Plainly and conclusively it was his Father who is "the only one [*monos*] who is truly God [*theos*]." Do you need an army of learned linguists to help you grasp this sublime statement of Jesus? "The Father is the only one who is truly God." Jesus makes this statement in the context of his definitive statement about "eternal life." "Eternal life is

this: that they believe in you [Father] as the only one who is truly God" (John 17:3).

Jesus the Master Rabbi's shattering proposition about the Father as "the only one who is truly God" (John 17:3) has the potential to cause the denominational barriers to tumble. It has enormous power to engage the interest of Muslims and Jews and Christians and move them to enter into a new and meaningful dialogue. At present these three huge world religions are at loggerheads over the definition of how many and who God is.

When the creed of Jesus expressed in John 17:3 is taken to heart and the evident departure from it represented by the strange notion of a tri-personal God is seen as a foreign and unwanted perversion of Jesus' simple definition of the true God, the road to a greater unity will be open.

With God defined by John 17:3 and by thousands and thousands of singular personal pronouns designating Him as a single Person, we advise that attention be paid to the question, Who then is Jesus? **Luke 1:35** provides the supremely easy and definitive account of how, why and when Jesus is the Son of God. He is uniquely Son of God, certainly not because he is incomprehensibly also God — but precisely because of the miraculous new creation effected by God, the Father, in the womb of Mary. Luke 1:35, strategically placed by Luke, the historian-theologian, at the beginning of his two-volume theological treatise (Luke and Acts), has the potential for destroying long-standing confusion and division about Jesus. Expressly because of the miracle in Mary, Jesus is the Son of God. No further definition is required. This marvelous verse can claim to be a "control text" for the whole New Testament. The miracle in Mary **brings the Son into existence**. He was therefore not in existence before.

With God and Jesus His Son defined, it remains to define the Gospel, the heart of the saving Christian message. Where better and more appropriate to search for the right definition of the Gospel than in the words of Jesus, as he opened his evangelistic mission? Yet this obvious approach to defining Jesus' master Gospel term "Kingdom" is not the approach taken by churches in general! Plainly and clearly Jesus opened his ministry by commanding us to "believe on the basis [*en*] of the Gospel about Kingdom of God" (Mark 1:14-15). Jesus' urgent appeal is directed to the whole human race from the Great Commission, when Christianity as defined by Jesus was to go to the whole world, until Jesus comes back (Matt. 28:19-20). The great commission commands us all to change our minds, or "repent and believe the Gospel of the Kingdom of God" (Mark 1:14-15).

With equally plain and simple language Jesus declared that the whole rationale for his ministry was "to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom of God: that is the

reason I was commissioned” (Luke 4:43). Is that hard? Surely not. It remains only to define the Kingdom, with Jesus’ own sayings, as that renewed society which he will introduce worldwide at his return in the future. For this he urged us to pray, “May Your Kingdom come” (not “May Your Kingdom spread!”). Certainly not just “May Your kingdom rule in my heart,” which immediately obscures the real and concrete meaning of “Kingdom” as a literal and future government. The Kingdom, according to Jesus, is that revolutionary world government which the Messiah will inaugurate at his Second Coming, to be prepared for in advance with all urgency.

Yes, of course the Kingdom of God Gospel, which in obedience to Jesus we are commanded to believe and obey, means a changed lifestyle *now* and until the end of our lives. We are to “walk” (the Bible’s Christian living word) in obedience to Jesus’ and “Jesus-in-Paul’s” teaching. But the word **Kingdom** is largely and predominantly — and especially in the fundamental accounts of the Gospel given by Matthew, Mark and Luke — *not* a Kingdom in the heart, not “enthroning Jesus in the heart,” but nearly always the future new world order of which Christians are now heirs, “waiting for the Kingdom of God,” as was Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:43).

Observe carefully that *as a Christian disciple* Joseph had certainly “enthroned” Jesus (to use the popular language) in his personal life. Joseph was a disciple (Matt. 27:57). But Joseph did not confuse the term Kingdom of God by making it a synonym for the Christian life now. He was still *waiting for* the Kingdom of God, after the historical ministry of Jesus was finished. Had Joseph missed the Kingdom? Of course not. He defined the Kingdom, as did Jesus almost invariably, as the Kingdom to be inaugurated at his future coming. The thief on the cross as a good disciple also thought of the Kingdom as future at the Second Coming (Luke 23:42).

Definitions of the Christian Gospel fail if they do not *start* with the Kingdom statements in the words of Jesus. “The Kingdom of God was at hand,” on the horizon, and calling for urgent action on our part. The Kingdom of God describes a time in the future when Jesus will again eat and drink with the disciples (Luke 22:18). The Kingdom of God is the Kingdom in which the resurrected Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will reappear to receive the promised inheritance they have never gained (Matt. 8:11). The Kingdom of God is still “about to come,” Jesus said, “when you see all these things happening,” the final events predicted in Luke 21 (see v. 31). The Kingdom of God is the great event of future judgment and salvation when the decision of God, in Christ, will exclude or include us in the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is not to be implemented worldwide

until the nobleman Jesus returns from heaven (Luke 19:11-27).

What will it mean to be “in the Kingdom”? Reducing the Kingdom teaching to “the good life now” destroys the *primary* meaning of Kingdom in the words of Jesus, as the Kingdom which will be given to the little flock (Luke 12:32). That is not a “Kingdom in the heart.” It is a new political order on earth replacing all present nation-states at the last trumpet (Rev. 11:15-18).

The Kingdom of God in that passage begins not now but in the future. Christians are *heirs* of the Kingdom now, as they prepare for it with urgency, living in the energizing hope of its appearance when Jesus comes back. That Kingdom is defined firstly by the prophets of Israel in the Hebrew Bible, and most notably in the prophet Daniel who defines the Kingdom as one which will be “under the whole heaven” (7:27), not *in* heaven! When the Kingdom comes, which is the center of all good Christian prayer: “May Your Kingdom come,” the saints of all the ages will function as co-rulers with Jesus (Dan. 7:18, 22, 27, RSV). The leading Christians, the apostles, will “sit on 12 thrones to administer the restored tribes of Israel” (see Matt. 19:28). The same promise reoccurs in Luke 22:28-30 where it is made the essence of the New Covenant. Jesus shed his blood to bring that Kingdom covenant into force. “Just as my Father has covenanted to give me a Kingdom, so I covenant with you to give you the Kingdom, and you will be seated on thrones to administer the twelve tribes of Israel.”

This promised Kingdom, the heart of the Christian Gospel, guarantees the believers “power over the nations” (Rev. 2:26) which they certainly do not have now. Christians are to be rewarded with positions of authority in that Kingdom and “they will sit with Jesus in his throne,” the throne of David to be restored in the land. Paul warned Christians against the error of thinking that they were already functioning as kings: “You are already satisfied; you have already grown rich; you have become kings without us! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we also might become kings with you” (1 Cor. 4:8).

The principal and fundamental meaning of “Kingdom” in the recorded teaching of Jesus is not an “ethical” standard in the heart now. It is not an interiorized Kingdom. It is nearly always (98% of the Kingdom texts) the Kingdom of the future, dependent on the future binding of Satan “so that he can no longer deceive the nations” (Rev. 20:3), a brand new state of affairs. The relationship of Christians to the Kingdom is that they are invited to be that royal family, privileged, through testing and trial now, who will assist Jesus in “fixing” the world on a grand and blessed scale when the Kingdom comes. Unless this primary definition of Kingdom is clear to the minds of churchgoers, the

Gospel of the Kingdom, the Christian saving Gospel, is not firmly established. In traditional and popular preaching that all-important royal Kingdom of Jesus and of the Father has been waffled away into some vague hope of “heaven when I die.”

With that alien concept, based on the false teaching that we have “immortal souls” which must either fly off bodiless at death to heaven or be tortured forever in a subterranean hellfire, the Gospel of the Kingdom is muddled and confused. The energy of the word of the Kingdom, the creative seed which imparts the life of God to the believer (Luke 8:11-12; Matt. 13:19) is fatally damaged when the Kingdom of God is not properly defined by means of a systematic presentation of the **Kingdom sayings of Jesus**, based on Daniel and the land promise to Abraham. The Christian Gospel was preached ahead of time to Abraham, Paul said to the erring Galatians (Gal. 3:8). Uprooted from its Hebrew soil, the Kingdom of God floats around vaguely in the minds of churchgoers. When this happens the heart of the faith is threatened and churches cannot expect to be vibrant and effective. The word or Gospel of the Kingdom is to be “energizing in us” (1 Thess. 2:13) and we are to conduct ourselves, “walk worthy of the God who invites us into the Kingdom” (2:12) as believers in Christ, as royal family in training, the aristocracy of tomorrow’s new government on earth.

Defining the Kingdom, starting with Jesus, will do much to unite the fragmented denominations, provided they first come into line with Jesus’ unitary monotheism so beautifully declared in John 17:3. And provided Jesus is presented as the Messiah and Savior, not a visitor from outer space. God did not become a man; God became a Father when the miracle of the procreation of the Son of God occurred in the womb of his mother (Luke 1:35; Matt. 1:18, 20; Ps. 2:7; 2 Sam. 7:14).

The biblical definition of God, Jesus and the Gospel has been damaged for millennia, since the second century, by the regrettable influx of pagan philosophy. “Heaven as a resort for souls” has replaced the real, concrete Kingdom of God coming on earth when Jesus returns. Christian destiny is missing from most current preaching.

This leaves churches as “disaster areas” needing urgent reform, as they return to the simple basics of Jesus’ and Paul’s Gospel about the Kingdom (Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; Matt. 24:14) which is identical with the Gospel of grace (Acts 20:24-25; 28:30-31).

We may take courage and comfort from the warning words of leading New Testament scholar Bishop Tom Wright, who deplores the mindless attitude towards biblical truth so evident in churches. Listen to Wright’s searing criticism and penetrating analysis of the “mess we are in,” marked by the evident fragmentation of Christian denominationalism:

Wright observes: “Traditionally, of course, we suppose that Christianity teaches about a heaven above, to which the saved or blessed go, and a hell below, for the wicked and impenitent. This is still assumed by many both inside and outside the church, as the official line which they may or may not accept.

“A remarkable example arrived in the mail not long ago, a book, apparently a bestseller by Maria Shriver, the present first lady of California, who is married to Arnold Schwarzenegger and whose uncle was John F. Kennedy. The book is called *What’s Heaven?* and is aimed at children, with lots of large pictures of fluffy clouds in blue skies. Each page of text has one sentence in extra large type, making the basic message of the book crystal clear. Heaven, says Shriver, is ‘somewhere you believe in...It’s a beautiful place where you can sit on soft clouds and talk to other people who are there. At night you can sit next to the stars, which are the brightest of any in the universe...If you are good throughout your life, then you get to go to heaven...When your life is finished here on earth God sends angels down to take you up to Heaven to be with Him there...And Grandma is alive in me...Most important she taught me to believe in me...She is in a safe place with the stars, with God and the angels...She is watching over us from up there...I want you to know [says the heroine to her great-grandma] that even though you are no longer here, your spirit will always be alive in me.’”

Wright comments on this amazing piece of misleading information offered by the authoress of *What’s Heaven?* “This is more or less exactly what millions of people in the Western world have come to believe, to accept as truth and to teach their children.” Bishop Wright was sent the book, he says, by a friend who said appropriately, “I hope you find this awful book helpful in what not to say.”

Wright then elaborates his point: “Many Christians grow up assuming that whenever the New Testament speaks of heaven it refers to the place to which the saved will go after death. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus’ sayings in the other gospels about the kingdom of God are rendered as ‘kingdom of heaven.’ Since many read Matthew first, when they find Jesus talking about ‘entering the Kingdom of heaven,’ they have their assumptions confirmed, and they suppose that Jesus is indeed talking about how to go to heaven when you die, which is certainly not what either Jesus or Matthew had in mind. Many mental pictures have grown up around this and are now assumed to be what the Bible teaches or what Christians believe. But the language of heaven in the New Testament doesn’t work that way.”

Wright then adds: “God’s Kingdom in the preaching of Jesus refers not to postmortem destiny, not to our escape from this world into another one, but to God’s

sovereign rule coming ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’ The roots of the misunderstanding go very deep, not least into the residual Platonism [paganism] that has infected whole swaths of Christian thinking and has misled people into supposing that Christians are meant to devalue this present world and our present bodies and regard them as shabby or shameful...In the book of Revelation we find not ransomed souls making their way to a disembodied heaven, but rather the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, uniting the two in a lasting embrace.”

Bishop Wright has hit upon one element of the disaster which is fragmented denominational Christianity. He notes that “most Christians today, I fear, never think about this from one year to the next.” They are indeed trapped in a mindless, non-Berean state of mind. The status quo, what we learned in church, is accepted as real and true, when it is no more than a mishmash of Platonic paganism, buttressed by a few Bible verses twisted or torn from their context. No wonder, then, that many who do take the trouble to think for themselves come to realize that “heaven as traditionally pictured looks insufferably boring — sitting on clouds and playing harps all the time.”⁹

What degree of whistle blowing is going to be necessary for the fragmented churches to demand a complete overhaul of their definition of the faith of Jesus, biblical and apostolic Christianity? How shrill and penetrating does the learned and valid criticism of the mythology which masquerades as Gospel truth have to be before the long overdue Reformation bursts on the world?

The New Testament warns on page after page that false belief is a deadly threat. Paul foresaw trouble looming large on the horizon. With power-packed words he indicts all failure to be constantly alert, lest we fall prey to nonsense camouflaged as saving truth: In 2 Timothy 4:1-4, the apostle speaking for Jesus said: “I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his Kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.”

“Heaven in the Bible is nowhere the destination of the dying,” declared another Cambridge scholar. When “Kingdom,” “God” and “Son of God” regain their biblical definitions churches may expect a healthy unity to emerge. While we avoid the definitions of these

master-terms given by Jesus and Paul, we may expect business as usual, and a stifling dullness which keeps church members under the iron fist of popular biblical misunderstanding of God, Jesus and their coming Kingdom in a renewed earth. “Unless you accept the Kingdom of God as a little child, you will not enter it,” Jesus said (Luke 18:17), reflecting his infectious delight in the Gospel about the Kingdom, for which he preached and died. The summary of his Kingdom work is given us in those amazing statements of Revelation 5:9-10: “And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you [Jesus] to take the book and to break its seals; for you were slain, and purchased for God with your blood men and women from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them *to be a kingdom* and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.”

The primary meaning of Kingdom remains the Kingdom of Messiah’s expectation, for which believers of all nations are to prepare now in view of the royal office promised to them. Salvation in that future Kingdom depends as Hebrews 5:9 states on our present obedience to Jesus who “became to all those who obey him the source of eternal salvation.” His first and programmatic command is “Repent and believe the Gospel of the Kingdom of God,” and of course, “define the Kingdom as I do in my scores of Kingdom sayings!”✧

Comments

“I wanted to take a moment and thank you for your monthly publications. I have waited years for such a wonderful and studied approach to the Scripture. I must also deeply thank you for your time and efforts in aiding us in our understanding.” — *Florida*

“Very impressed with all the material you have here. I am new in my faith and noticed that something was missing in all the preaching I have heard. They weren’t preaching the ‘Kingdom.’” — *California*

“I have been receiving your newsletter *Focus on the Kingdom* over a year now and I want to thank you for sending it. My wife and I enjoy reading it every month. It is rich with information. Thank you very much for faithfully mailing it to us. I am a Pastor and Teacher at our Church here. We are unitarians and hold the firm belief in Jesus Christ being the Son of the Living God.” — *Trinidad and Tobago*

William Tyndale: “In the universities they have ordained that no man shall look on the Scripture, until he be noselled in heathen learning eight or nine years and armed with false principles, with which he is clean shut out of the understanding of the Scripture.”

In response to a critical John Bell, Tyndale echoed this sentiment: “If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou doest.”

⁹ *Surprised by Hope*, pp. 17, 18.