

Focus on the Kingdom

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Anthony Buzzard, editor

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Gabriel Was Not a Trinitarian: Recovering the Biblical Son of God

Churchmen of all stripes frequently complain about disunity among Christians. The current ecumenical movement attempts to neutralize contemporary denominational divisions and contentions by promoting elements of faith on which all believers in Christ can agree. The question is, Does such a version of faith, an irreducible minimum which everyone approves, reflect the “faith once and for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), which Jude saw slipping away even in the first century?

If churchmen desire a common meeting point for differing denominations, why should they not consider with all seriousness the classic words of Gabriel delivered to Mary? When angels speak they are concise and logical. Each of their words must be carefully weighed and every ounce of information extracted. Replying to Mary’s very reasonable objection that she was as yet unmarried, Gabriel declared, “holy spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and *for that reason indeed (dio kai)* the holy child to be begotten will be called Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

I suggest that this Christological statement from the angel Gabriel be taken as the basis for identifying who Jesus is. It should be understood as a clarion call for unity, a rallying point for divided Christendom. What better way of calling Christians back to their first-century roots?

The message is simple and clear. The Son of God of Gabriel’s announcement is none other than a divinely created Son of God, coming into existence — begotten — as Son in his mother’s womb. All other claimants to divine Sonship and Messiahship may safely be discounted. A “Son of God” who is the *natural* son of Joseph could not, on the evidence of Gabriel, be the Messiah. Such a person would not answer to the Son who is son on the basis of a unique divine intervention in the biological chain. Equally false to Gabriel’s definition of the Son of God would be a son who *preexisted* his conception. Such a son could not possibly correspond to the Messiah presented by Gabriel, one whose existence is predicated on a creative act in history on the part of the Father.

Gabriel does not present a Son of God in transition from one state of existence to another. He announces the miraculous origin and beginning of the Messiah (cp. Matt. 1:18, 20: “the origin [Gk. *genesis*] of Jesus Christ, the Son of the Most High God.” The *later* concept of the Incarnation of a preexisting “eternal Son” cannot possibly be forced into the mold revealed by Gabriel. A *preexistent* Person who decides to *become* a man reduces himself, shrinks himself, in order to adopt the form of a human embryo. But such a Person is not conceived or begotten in the womb of a woman. He merely passes through that womb, adopting a new form of existence.

Conception and begetting mark the point at which an individual *begins* to exist, an individual who did *not* exist before! It is this non-preexisting individual whom Gabriel presents in the sacred documents for our reception. This Son of God, of Scripture as opposed to later church tradition, is a Son of God with a history in time only, not in eternity.

Following his marvelous promise that the Messiah would be the seed of Eve (Gen. 3:15), a prophet like Moses arising in Israel (Deut. 18:15-19) and the descendant by bloodline of David (II Sam. 7:14), God, in a precious moment of history, initiated the history of His unique Son. This was a Son through whom God expressly did *not* speak in previous times (Heb. 1:2). Naturally enough, since that prophesied Son was not then alive!

Only a few pages later Luke traces the lineage of Jesus, Son of God, back to Adam who likewise is called Son of God (Luke 3:38). The parallel is striking and immensely informative. Just as God by divine fiat created Adam from the dust as Son of God, so in due time He creates within the womb of a human female the one who is the supernaturally begotten Son of God. It is surely destructive of straightforward information and revelation to argue that the Son of God did *not* have his origin in Mary but as an eternal Spirit. This is to dehumanize the Son — to make him essentially non-human, merely a divine visitor disguised as a man.

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Luke presents Jesus as Son of God related to God in a parallel fashion to Adam (Luke 3:38). The attentive reader of Scripture will hear echoes of Israel as Son of God (Ex. 4:22; Hos. 11:1) and Davidic kings (Ps. 2). Like Israel before him, Jesus, the Son of God, goes through water to begin his spiritual journey (Luke 3:21; cp. Exod. 14, 15). In the wilderness and under trial Jesus proves himself to be the obedient Son unlike Israel who failed in the wilderness (Exod. 14-17; 32-34; Num. 11).

The whole story is ruined if another dimension is added to the story, namely that the Son of God was already a preexisting member of an eternal Trinity. Gabriel has carefully defined the nature of Jesus' Sonship and his words exclude any origin other than a supernatural origin in Mary.

Gabriel's Jesus, Son of God — the biblical Son — originates in Mary. He is conceived and begotten by miracle. In preexistence Christology, the main plank of Trinitarianism, a conception/begetting in Mary's womb does *not* bring about the existence of God's Son. According to Gabriel it *does*. Neither Gabriel nor Luke could possibly have been Trinitarians.

No need for centuries of complex wrangling over words. All that is required is belief of the angelic communication: "*For this reason precisely (dio kai)* — the creative miracle of God through His divine power — the child will be Son of God." For no other reason, for this reason only. (Note the very watered-down rendering of the NIV, "so the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.")

Jesus as Son of God is "the Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32; 8:28). Christians are also given this title, "sons of the Most High" (Luke 6:35; cp. Ps. 82:6). Jesus' royal Sonship is established by his miraculous begetting. That of the Christians originates with their rebirth or regeneration.

As the center of a new ecumenism the simple truth about the identity and nature of Christianity's central figure has the backing of those many scholars who know well that neither Luke nor Matthew show any sign of believing in a *pre-human eternal Son of God* of the post-biblical creeds. Raymond Brown's magisterial treatment of the birth narratives in his *Birth of the Messiah* makes a major point of the fact that neither Matthew nor Luke believed in the Incarnation of a pre-human, prehistoric Son.

Commenting on Luke 1:35, "therefore," Raymond Brown says, "of the nine times *dio kai* occurs in the New Testament, three are in Luke/Acts. It involves a certain causality and Lyonnet (in his *L'Annonciation*,

61.6) points out that this has embarrassed many orthodox theologians since in preexistence Christology a conception by the holy spirit in Mary's womb does not bring about the existence of God's son. Luke is seemingly unaware of such a Christology; conception is causally related to divine Sonship for him...And so I cannot follow those theologians who try to avoid the causal connotation in the 'therefore' which begins this line, by arguing that for Luke the conception of the child does not bring the Son of God into being." Raymond Brown insists that according to Luke, "We are dealing with the begetting of God's Son in the womb of Mary through God's creative spirit."¹

"Orthodoxy" derived from later Church Councils has to turn a blind eye to Gabriel's definition of the Son of God. It contradicted Gabriel by denying that the conception of Jesus brought about his existence as Son of God.

This is a very serious issue. Is the Jesus of the creeds, the Jesus under whose umbrella churches gather, really the created Son authorized by Scripture in Luke 1:35 and Matthew 1:18, 20?

Again, the exhaustive work of Brown on the birth narratives brings us the important fact that the Jesus of the Gospels is quite unlike the "eternally begotten" Son of the later creeds:

"Matthew and Luke press [the question of Jesus' identity] back to Jesus' conception. In the commentary **I shall stress** that Matthew and Luke show no knowledge of preexistence; seemingly for them the conception was the **becoming (begetting) of God's Son** (p. 31).

"The fact that Matthew can speak of Jesus as '**begotten**' (passive of *gennan*) suggests that for him the conception through the agency of the holy spirit is the **becoming of God's Son**. [In Matthew's and Luke's 'conception Christology'] God's creative action in the conception of Jesus begets Jesus as God's Son...There is **no suggestion of an Incarnation** whereby a figure who was previously with God takes on flesh. For preexistence Christology [Incarnation], the conception of Jesus is the beginning of an earthly career but **not the begetting of God's Son**. [Later] the virginal conception was no longer seen as the begetting of God's Son, but as the incarnation of God's Son, and that became orthodox Christian doctrine. This thought process is probably already at work **at the beginning of the second century**" (pp. 140-142).

Do we really believe the words of the Bible or has our tradition made it difficult to hear the text of

¹ *The Birth of the Messiah*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977, pp. 291, 312.

Scripture without the interfering voices of later tradition? There is the constant danger for us believers that the words of the Bible can be drowned out by the clamorous and sometimes threatening words of ecclesiastical teaching, which mostly goes unexamined. At stake here is the whole nature of the Savior. Is he really a human being, or did he have the benefit of billions of years of conscious existence before deciding to become a man? Is this latter picture anything more than a legendary addition to Apostolic faith?

The Son of God, Messiah and Savior, is defined in precise theological terms by Gabriel, laying the foundation of the whole New Testament and fulfilling the promises of the Old. Christians should unite around that clear portrait of Jesus presented by Gabriel. Jesus is the Son of God on one basis only, his miraculous coming into existence in Mary's womb. This was God's creative act, initiating His new creation and providing the model of Christian Sonship for us all. Though obviously we are not, like Jesus, brought into existence supernaturally, nevertheless we, like him, are to receive a supernatural birth from spirit by being born again under the influence of the Gospel (Gal. 3:2; Eph. 1:13, 14; Rom. 10:17; Matt. 13:19; Luke 8:11, 12; 1 Pet. 1:23-25; James 1:18).

The "divine" nature of Jesus has no other foundation than the stupendous miracle granted to Mary and to humanity. A Jesus who claims to be Son of God for any other reason should be rejected. A natural son of Joseph cannot qualify as the Messiah, nor can a person whose existence did not originate in his mother's womb by a divine creative miracle.

The constitution of Jesus as the unique Son of God is given its basis by the superb words of Gabriel in Luke 1:35. This definition of the Messiah, Son of God, should be allowed to stand. It was *later*, post-biblical tradition which interfered with the definitive, revealing statement of Gabriel. Once Jesus was turned into a preexisting Son of God who gave up one conscious existence for another, Christology immediately became problematic (as witnessed by the centuries of disputes, excommunications, and fierce dogmatic decisions of Church Councils). A Son of God who is *already* Son of God before his conception in his mother is a personage essentially non-human. Under that revised scheme what came into existence in Mary was not the Son of God at all, but a created *human nature* added to an already existing Person. But Gabriel describes the creation of the Son of God himself, not the creation of a human nature added to

an already existing Son. The two models are quite different.

Some may object that John 1:1ff ("in the beginning was the Word...") present us with a second Personage who is alive before his conception. If that it is to be argued, let it be clear that John would then be in contradiction of Luke and Matthew. Matthew's and Luke's Jesus comes into existence as the Son of God, *not in eternity*, but some six months later than his cousin John the Baptist.

John cannot have contradicted Luke and Matthew. The solution is to harmonize John with Luke, taking our stand with Luke. John did not write, "In the beginning was *the Son of God*." What he wrote was "In the beginning was *the word*" (not Word, but word). Logos in Greek does not describe a person before the birth of the Son. The logos is the self-expressive intelligence and mind of the One God. Logos often carries the sense of plan or promise. That *promise* of a Son was indeed in the beginning. The Son, however, was still the object of promise in II Samuel 7:14. David did not imagine that the promised Son of God ("My Son"), David's descendant, was already in existence! That Son was in fact begotten in due time. He was "raised up" — that is, made to appear on the scene of human history — when Mary conceived him. Acts 13:33 applies "this day I have begotten you" (Ps. 2:7) to the origin of the Son in his mother.

F.F. Bruce agrees with us: God "raised up" Jesus "in the sense in which he raised up David (Acts 13:22, cp. 3:22, 7:37). The promise of Acts 13:23, the fulfillment of which is here described [v. 33], has to do with the sending of Messiah, not his resurrection which is described in verse 34" (*Acts of the Apostles, Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, p. 269).

The word, plan and promise which existed from the beginning was also "with God." In the wisdom literature of the Bible things are said to be "with God" when they exist as decrees and promises in His divine Plan (Job 27:13; 10:13; 23:14). Wisdom was also "with God" (Prov. 8:22, 30) in the beginning but she was not a person. Neither was the logos a person, but rather a promise and plan. So closely identified with God was His word that John can say "the word was God." The word was the creative purpose of God, in promise and later in actuality. That creative presence of God eventually emerged in history as the Son of God begotten in Mary, the unique Son (*monogenes*).

A number of unfortunate attempts have been made to force John not only into contradiction with the clear Christology of Matthew and Luke but into agreement with the much later decisions of Church Councils.

There is no capital on “word” in John 1:1, a, b, and c. And there is no justification for reading “All things were made through **Him**.” That rendering improperly leads us to think of the word as a second divine Person, rather than the mind and promise of God. Eight English translations before the KJV did not read “All things were made by **Him**.” They read “All things were made by **it**,” a much more natural way of referring to the word of God. Thus, for example, the Geneva Bible of 1602: “All things were made by **it** and without **it** was made nothing that was made.” **No one reading those words would imagine that there was a Son in heaven before his birth. And no one would find in John a view of the Son different from the portrait presented by Gabriel in Luke.**

Christian tradition from the second century embarked on an amazing embellishment of the biblical story which obscured Jesus’ Messianic Sonship and humanity. Once the Son was given a pre-history as coequal and coessential with his Father, the unity of God was threatened and monotheism was compromised, though every effort was made to conceal this with the protest that God was still one, albeit no longer one *Person*, the Father, but one “*Essence*,” comprising more than one Person. But this was a dangerous shift into Greek philosophical categories alien to the New Testament’s Hebrew theology and creeds (cp. John 17:3; 5:44; Mark 12:28ff).

Several other “adjustments” became necessary under the revised doctrine of God. John was made to say in certain other verses what he did not say. This trend is well illustrated by the New International Version in John 13:3, 16:28 and 20:17. In none of these passages does the original say that Jesus was going *back* to God. In the first two Jesus spoke of his intention to “go to the Father” and in the last of his “ascending” to his Father. The NIV embellishes the story by telling us that Jesus was going *back* or returning to God. A Son whose existence is traced to his mother’s womb cannot go *back* to the Father, since he has never before been with the Father.

In John 17:5 Jesus spoke of the glory which he “had” before the foundation of the world. But in the same context (vv. 22 and 24) that same glory has already “been given” (past tense) to disciples not yet born at the time when Jesus spoke. It is clear then that the glory which both Jesus and the disciples “had” is a glory in promise and prospect. Jesus thus prays to have conferred on him at his ascension the glory which God had undertaken to give him from the foundation of the world. John speaks in Jewish fashion

of a preexisting Purpose, not a preexisting second Person. Our point was well expressed by a distinguished Lutheran New Testament professor, H.H. Wendt (*The System of Christian Teaching*, 1907):

“It is clear that John 8:58 [‘Before Abraham was I am’] and 17:5 do not speak of a real preexistence of Christ. We must not treat these verses in isolation, but understand them in their context.

“The saying in John 8:58, ‘Before Abraham came to be, I am’ was prompted by the fact that Jesus’ opponents had countered his remark in v. 51 by saying that Jesus was not greater than Abraham or the prophets (v. 52). As the Messiah commissioned by God Jesus is conscious of being in fact superior to Abraham and the prophets. For this reason he replies (according to the intervening words, v. 54ff) that Abraham had ‘seen his day,’ i.e., the entrance of Jesus on his historical ministry, and ‘had rejoiced to see’ that day. And Jesus strengthens his argument by adding the statement, which sounded strange to the Jews, that he had even been ‘before Abraham’ (v. 58). This last saying must be understood in connection with v. 56. Jesus speaks in vv. 55, 56 and 58 as if his present ministry on earth stretches back to the time of Abraham and even before. His sayings were perceived by the Jews in this sense and rejected as nonsense. But Jesus obviously did not (in v. 56) mean that Abraham had actually experienced Jesus’ appearance on earth and seen it literally. Jesus was referring to Abraham’s *spiritual vision* of his appearance on earth, by which Abraham, at the birth of Isaac, had foreseen at the same time the promised Messiah, and had rejoiced at the future prospect of the greater one (the Messiah) who would be Israel’s descendant. Jesus’ reference to his existence before Abraham’s birth must be understood in the same sense. There is no sudden heavenly preexistence of the Messiah here: the reference is again obviously to his earthly existence. And this earthly existence is precisely the existence of the Messiah. As such, it was not only present in Abraham’s mind, but even before his time, as the subject of God’s foreordination and foresight. The sort of preexistence Jesus has in mind is ‘ideal’ [in the world of ideas and plans]. In accordance with this consciousness of being the Messiah preordained from the beginning, Jesus can indeed make the claim to be greater than Abraham and the prophets.

“In John 17:5 Jesus asks the Father to give him now the heavenly glory which he had with the Father before the world was. The conclusion that because Jesus possessed a preexistent glory in heaven he must also have preexisted personally in heaven is taken too

hastily. This is proven by Matt. 6:20 ('Lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven'), 25:34 ('Come, you blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom **prepared for you** from the foundation of the world'), Col. 1:5 ('the hope which is **laid up for you in heaven** about which you heard in the word of Truth, the Gospel'), and I Pet. 1:4 ('an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, which does not fade away, **reserved in heaven** for you'). Thus a *reward* can also be thought of as preexistent in heaven. Such a reward is destined for human beings and already *held in store*, to be awarded to them at the end of their life. So it is with heavenly glory which Jesus requests. He is not asking for a *return* to an earlier heavenly condition. Rather he asks God to give him now, at the end of his work as Messiah on earth (v. 4), the heavenly reward which God had appointed from eternity for him, as Messiah. As the Messiah and Son he knows he has been loved and foreordained by the Father from eternity (v. 24). Both John 8:58 and 17:5 are concerned with God's predetermination of the Messiah" (cp. *Teaching of Jesus*, pp. 453-460).

Note: Things which are held in store as divine plans for the future are said to be "with God." Thus in Job 10:13 Job says to God, "These things you have concealed in your heart: I know that this is *with* You" (see KJV). "He performs what is *appointed for me*, and many such decrees are *with* Him" (Job 23:14). Thus the glory which Jesus had "with God" was the glory which God had **planned for him** as the decreed reward for his Messianic work now completed. The promise of glory "preexisted," not Jesus himself. Note that this same glory which Jesus asked for has already been given to you (see John 17:22, 24). It was given to you and Jesus whom God loved before the foundation of the world (v. 24; cp. Eph. 1:4). You may therefore say that you now "have" that glory although it is glory in promise and prospect, to be gained at the Second Coming. Jesus had that same glory in prospect before the foundation of the world (John 17:5).

Paul can say that we now "have" a new body with God in heaven (II Cor. 5:1) — i.e., we have the **promise** of it, not in actuality. That body will be ours at our resurrection at the return of Christ. We now "have" it in anticipation and promise only. ("We **have** a building of God..." II Cor. 5:1). We do not in fact have it yet. This is the very Jewish language of promises decreed by God. They are absolutely certain to be fulfilled. ✧

Would Jesus Have Killed His Enemies?

by Bill Wachtel

In defense of Christian participation in war, some mention Cornelius as having no negative mention in the New Testament. All agree that Christ accepts people just as they are. Cornelius was baptized into the Christian faith. After he was baptized, he was to be taught all that Christ laid down as instructions for his people to follow (Matt. 28:19, 20). Those instructions include a mandate to his followers to be peacemakers, not war-makers (Matt. 5:9, 43-48). We are to follow peace with all men, without which no man will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). The weapons of our warfare are spiritual, not carnal (physical) (2 Cor. 10:4). As much as it depends on us, we are to live at peace with all men (Rom. 12:18-21). To me this means that no matter how others treat us as enemies, we are not to retaliate as enemies to them. Paul recognized that governments bear the sword. He did not however allow Christians the right to vengeance: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil...Beloved do not look for revenge, but leave room for wrath, for it is written 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (Rom. 12:17, 19). The state, however, is an "avenger for God" (Rom. 13:4).

These teachings, of course, are meant for Christians — those dedicated to the will of God and the teachings of Christ. They do not tell rulers how to rule or governments how to govern. The New Testament shows that governments are, per se, an integral part of what Scripture calls "the world." Believers, though "in" the world, are called to be not "of" (John 15:19; 17:14) the world. They are appointed as ambassadors of the Kingdom of God. As such they are said by the New Testament to have "resident alien" status. They should stay out of the world's wars. If they do not, inevitably they will kill fellow believers as well as enemies. How then can the international church be recognized "by the love they have for one another"? (John 13:35). The whole point of Christian witness is destroyed if believers take the lives of other believers. Churches seem to recognize this contradiction of the Christian witness when they do not allow chaplains to bear arms. But why only the clergy? Is not every Christian supposed to follow Jesus? Do we really imagine Jesus donning a uniform, firing a gun or dropping a bomb?

Church history reveals that the church of the first two centuries at least agreed on non-combatant status and would not participate in armed conflict. Soldiers in the Roman army, when converted to Christ, chose death if necessary, rather than continuing to fight and kill

others. Such was and sometimes still is the cost of discipleship. It was only when the church had departed from the original faith, in Constantine's time, and united the majority church to the state, that professing Christians began to join the military. (These are facts of history that are easily verifiable.) Their (false) assumption was that the state had become Christian!

One of the great recoveries of the Anabaptists, the "Radical Reformation," was that of pacifism — in contrast to the Lutherans and Calvinists, who continued to support the Roman Catholic view of a Church united with the State. Our Anabaptist forefathers were persecuted bitterly for this stand by both Catholics and Protestants. Most of the "evangelicals" of our day continue in this Protestant tradition of military participation. But are they in fact following the sometimes unpopular obedience demanded by Jesus?

Rulers are empowered to use the "sword" to punish evildoers (Rom. 13:1-5). The State may judge Saddam to be a threat to this nation and to the world. It makes its decision to declare war on Saddam. This does not mean, however, that Christians are required to take up the sword to help in administering the punishment. Thankfully, our nation recognizes the right of conscientious objection. Some nations do not. Christians in those nations have often been terribly persecuted for that stand, but where in Scripture are Christians promised exemption from persecution?

I hope these thoughts will clarify my views on this subject. I served in the Navy in World War II, and in fact was baptized while in the Navy. It was after my discharge that I began to study the Scriptures and to grow in Christ. Then I came to realize that military service was not meant to be an option for those dedicated to the will of God and to His service as "soldiers for Christ" (2 Tim. 2:1-5). ✧

1 and 2 Thessalonians and the Events of the End of the Age

There is a great need for Christians to share Paul's simple program for the end of the age. This is beautifully laid out by the Apostle in many of his epistles, but more distinctly than anywhere else in 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

Popular readings of the Bible often reflect a failure to examine the context of any given verse. It is essential in reading the Bible (or any piece of written information) to follow the logical progression of the writer. The chapter breaks in our Bible have sometimes allowed us to wreak havoc on what Paul wrote. We simply must not disturb the movement of

Paul's thought by interrupting the flow of his thinking with arbitrary gaps, or reading one verse without its context.

Let us see how important this is in the Thessalonian letters.

The Coming of Jesus

Paul has his eye on the second coming as he writes. It is a major concern of his to keep his flock properly instructed about that great event of the future. "For what is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming?" (1 Thess. 2:19). Yes, the Lord is coming. So Paul prays that "he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones" (1 Thess. 3:13).

1 Thessalonians 4

A question had arisen in the Thessalonians' minds. How were the Christians who had already died to meet Christ at his coming? The answer is given by Paul as a "word of the Lord" (4:15) — i.e., based on sayings of Jesus to which Paul had access, some of which were later written down in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 (the Olivet discourse). The plan is quite simple: "We who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord shall not take precedence over those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord... Now as to times and epochs, brethren..." Paul continues (the chapter break must be ignored), "You yourselves know full well that the *day of the Lord* [which he has just finished describing] will come like a thief in the night." That is to say that when the *world* is saying "'peace and safety,' then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child." In other words, disaster will overcome the godless unexpectedly like a thief, and they will not escape. But that "day of the Lord," which Paul had just described as the time when the saints would be caught up to meet Jesus, will not overtake the church as a thief. It will, however, have a catastrophic effect on the world.

In 2 Thessalonians, Paul continued his theme, adding new material deliberately. This was to counteract the deceptive influence of a "spirit" or "letter pretending to come from us," maintaining that this great event, the coming of the Lord, was immediately at hand (2 Thess. 2:2, KJV, ASV).

The Scheme for the End

Paul had one burning desire. It was to reinforce, against false teaching, what he had already taught the Thessalonians in his first letter. So in 2 Thessalonians 1:7 he begins by telling the church that they must expect to suffer tribulation until the moment of relief arrives. What was that moment? Until *when* must they expect to be persecuted? Verse 7 tells us: God will give you relief from tribulation “when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God” (2 Thess. 1:7, 8).

Paul knows nothing of a preceding *secret* rapture to remove Christians from the Great Tribulation.

Paul’s teaching in 2 Thessalonians is precisely what he had said in his first letter, though now he adds further details. Christians must be ready to be caught up to meet the Lord. They will then be safe, while the Lord’s appearance will overwhelm the heedless world.

Tribulation Until Christ’s Coming in Power

Not only must the church expect tribulation right up to the moment when Jesus is revealed from heaven in flaming fire (2 Thess. 1:7), but they must also realize (2 Thess. 2:1-3) that certain events must happen before Christ comes back. In 2 Thessalonians 2 Paul opens by restating his subject. He wants to instruct his readers further about the “coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to him” (v. 1).

His readers will remember from 1 Thessalonians 4:17 that they are to assemble to meet Jesus. This event, the day of the Lord — he had already called it the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 — cannot happen before the apostasy and the revelation of the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:3). The restrainer — it is a singular male being (v. 7) as well as a neuter force (v. 6) — will hold back the Antichrist until the latter is finally allowed to appear. Later, Jesus will arrive. This arrival is his coming, and his coming means our gathering together to meet him (v. 1). That great event will save the Christians as 2 Thessalonians 1:7 had said, and it will mean the end of the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:8) as well as punishment upon the godless world (1 Thess. 5:3; 2 Thess. 1:7).

Summary

Paul was evidently most unhappy about misconceptions in regard to the second coming. He wanted to assure the Thessalonians that dead Christians would not be left out of the great second coming event. They would meet Christ in the air with the Christians who survived until the great day. The day would take the wicked world completely by

surprise. It would be as unprepared as a householder who does not expect a thief to break into his house.

Later a wrong idea began to circulate in the church — that the promised day of the Lord was to come without any further delay. Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians 2 specifically to correct this idea. He says that “the coming of our Lord Jesus and our gathering together” to him (v. 1) cannot occur before two things happen: The falling away (apostasy) and the appearance of the Antichrist. Following the reign of Antichrist Jesus will appear in glory and destroy the “wicked one” (2 Thess. 2:8; cp. Isa. 11:4). This is the simple program described by 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. The church’s task is to guard the information faithfully and teach it to others.

A coherent picture of the end emerges, provided the text is allowed to inform us and if necessary modify previous misunderstandings. Interference with the message sometimes occurs when our own presuppositions block our understanding and deafen us to Paul’s words. We must be careful that we do not drown out Paul’s instructions with our own noisy ideas!✧

Comments

“You have a wonderful website. I am planning to do a comprehensive review of all your articles and doctrinal positions; I have learned much already. Your organization represents one of the very few I could be happy in. Truth is stated as an objective by many organizations, but it is actually hard to come by.” — *North Carolina*

“I have a copy of your booklet *Who Is Jesus? A Plea for a Return to Belief in Jesus, the Messiah*. I find it very interesting and true. I have been telling people that for years, as I was a pastor.” — *Michigan*

“I didn’t come to question the popular beliefs too easily. I used to just go along with the flow, so to speak. But something was just never quite right about what they were teaching, and I couldn’t find it for myself anywhere in the Bible, so I started to do some research, and found out about the council in 325, and how most beliefs were of Greek origin. Ever since then I have been trying to find the truth. Needless to say you’ve opened my eyes.” — *Florida*

“Thanks for the books you sent me, especially *The Coming Kingdom of the Messiah*. I’m intending to order 50 of them to give out to people who are interested in the Kingdom message.” — *Canada*

Anthony’s commentary on Mark (in two videos) is available for any who would like it. We suggest a cost of \$6 per video (this includes postage). We offer it free to our overseas readers.