

Focus on the Kingdom

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15th Theological Conference

We want to extend a warm invitation to you to be with us April 21-23, 2006. I think this is going to be a wonderful conference. Greg Deuble from Australia will be with us and “armed” with his brand new book which is really a blockbuster event for the Abrahamic faith. We plan to allow a little more space for fellowship time this year.

This is a unique gathering of Abrahamic believers, bringing people together from various countries. A number of speakers will present papers on subjects of interest to us all, with time for questions following. The conference is a rich time of fellowship and an opportunity to meet and encourage others of Abrahamic persuasion. There will be opportunities, as usual, for shorter faith story presentations. This is not an academic occasion, for specialists only! It is a meeting for Christian education and fellowship to further the great truths of Scripture. Many of the participants have newly discovered the Abrahamic faith and are excited to meet others of similar persuasion.

The cost of the conference is \$105 if you register by April 7, and \$130 after April 7. Please register by phoning Atlanta Bible College at 800-347-4261 or 404-362-0052. Rooms are \$75 per night at the Hampton Inn in McDonough, Georgia and you can make reservations by phoning them at 770-914-0077. Up to four persons may stay in one room at that price. Please plan on arriving on Thursday and the conference will begin at 9:00 am on Friday, April 21st. The block rate includes a continental breakfast. Transportation from Atlanta Airport to the hotel and to the meeting place at Cornerstone Bible Church in McDonough will be provided.

The weather is normally gorgeous in Georgia in April. Please do consider joining us. It is so important for us all to gather from time to time to celebrate our common faith.

The Amazing Aims and Claims of Jesus

Many of you have been kind enough to express appreciation, as well as some excellent constructive criticism, of our “advance” chapters of the book I hope to have ready in time for the April conference (April 21-23). The book will be entitled *The Amazing Aims and Claims of Jesus: What You Didn't Learn in Church*.

Our purpose is to have nine rather simple chapters on what we think are the fundamentals of New Testament Christianity. We think Jesus came offering the public immortality. This claim is so vast and wonderful that everyone needs to know about it, in plain language. This month I offer you the last of seven Kingdom lessons, which follow the initial nine chapters of the book. These lessons develop the Kingdom theme in more detail, and in Lesson 7, I have attempted to summarize, and add some warnings against contemporary traps in belief systems which we think have serious problems. These can be counteracted rather easily from plain Scripture, we suggest.

God's Great Kingdom Plan Through Jesus: How to Live Forever

Master Texts: “All Scripture [the Bible] is breathed out by God and is useful for doctrine” (2 Tim. 3:16).

“How blessed are the meek: they are going to have the earth as their inheritance” (Matt. 5:5).

“If anyone does not bring you the teaching of the Messiah, he has no relation with the Father and the Son” (see 2 John 9, 10).

“Not everyone who says to me [Jesus] ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the Kingdom, but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me in that [future] day, ‘Lord, Lord, we preached in your name, didn't we? We did many amazing miracles in your name, didn't we? We cast out demons in your name, didn't we?’ Then I will declare to them: ‘Depart from me, you who work iniquity. I never recognized you’” (Matt. 7:21-23).

“The power of the spirit will come over you [Mary] and for that reason precisely the one to be begotten [brought into existence] will be called the Son of God” (see Luke 1:35).

Wisdom speaks: “I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you” (see Prov. 1:23).

The Gospel of the Kingdom is the all-important Message of the Bible. Its design is to inform us human beings about what God is planning for us and the world. It reveals to us the purpose of existence. It presents us with an astonishing destiny.

It was delivered to us by God's miraculously begotten Son, who, as he said, “came to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom: that is the reason why God commissioned me” (Luke 4:43; Mark 1:38). Paul and the other Apostles taught the same Kingdom Gospel as Jesus had. They were obediently following Jesus by promoting

the Gospel as Jesus had preached it. There is thus one Gospel for everyone, of every nation. Jesus gave his marching orders for the Church until he comes back (Matt. 28:19, 20). He commanded that the same Gospel as he had preached, first to Jews, be announced to all the nations.

Jesus also commanded that converts be disciplined in the teachings of the Christian faith and that they be baptized in water.

Water baptism was not an “optional extra.” It remains, as it always was, a direct command of Jesus until the end of the age. Jesus warned that saying “Lord” to him is inadequate if we are not willing to do what he says: “Why do you call me lord, and you will not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46). It is an empty pretense to claim Christ as Master and Lord, and then to oppose his simple, basic teachings, such as belief in the Gospel of the Kingdom, water baptism and of course a persistent Christian lifestyle until the end.

The Christian world is now fragmented into thousands of differing groups. Something has happened to confuse the united faith of the New Testament writers. Among these were people who had known Jesus personally, spent hours with him and listened day after day to his teachings. They well knew his amazing aims and claims. In addition they knew that three days after being killed by crucifixion, he reappeared alive and immortal. They “ate and drank with him after he came back from death” (Acts 10:41).

The testimony of the Apostles to the resurrection of Jesus deserves our full confidence in its truth. There is every reason to believe them. They saw Jesus die. They saw him buried and they saw him alive again. They had no reason at all to lie. Nor were they hallucinating! They simply knew what had happened, and they were naturally compelled to share the glorious hope of immortality, through following and obeying Jesus, with us all.

Some absurd objections have been raised against the Apostles. No one saw Jesus leave the tomb, it is said. Therefore the resurrection is only a guess. If you saw someone at home and healthy who you knew had been in the hospital, would you immediately doubt that he had left the hospital because no one had seen him leave?

God does not expect us to guess, or just “have blind faith.” Faith is believing and believing is based on solid evidence, the evidence of credible witnesses. Anyone who knows the New Testament documents well, works with the original languages perhaps or reads the Bible in many versions, knows that these are not fraudulent writings. Their authors would have gained nothing by lying, and they were not insane. Insane people cannot produce writings of the supremely high quality of the New Testament.

The Apostles risked life and limb and faced the furious opposition of some Jews and Gentiles, as they made the Good News of the Kingdom known in the Roman Empire. Some of them died for the Message they preached so tirelessly. To imagine they died for what they knew to be untrue is ludicrous! These men were honest and courageous. They had been witnesses at first hand of the events of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. It is the greatest presumption and arrogance for anyone two thousand years later to say he or she knows better. You were not there. They were.

Jesus and the Quest for Immortality in the Kingdom

Jesus’ aim was to show the public how to live forever. How to have indestructible life. How to be beyond the power of death. How to have perfect health for all eternity.

Jesus taught the secret of immortality, by inviting men and women everywhere to believe what he taught. He himself claimed to be the one and only perfect agent and Son of God. Jesus was uniquely the Son of God *as a direct result* of the miracle of new creation by which God his Father, the God of Israel and of the Bible, brought him into existence (see Luke 1:35, above).

Jesus taught the Gospel of the Kingdom as the key to immortality. He taught the great Good News about the Kingdom for years before adding to the message the facts about his impending death and resurrection. The Kingdom Gospel, including the death and resurrection of the Savior, contains the conditions of the New Covenant.

Just as Moses had given the people of Israel the terms and stipulations of the Old Covenant (Ex. 24) and had then poured blood over the people as well as the book containing the words of the covenant, so Jesus as the final prophet (Deut. 18:15-18; Acts 3:22; 7:37) did the same. He first gave all the words of the New Covenant in the gospels (in five blocks of teaching in Matthew). Then Jesus announced his death. Blood is necessary for the inauguration of God’s principal covenants in the Bible.

Jesus then gave his own precious blood to inaugurate officially the New Covenant based not only on this death but on the tremendously important words of the covenant, his own teachings.

At the last supper held with his Apostles, the night before he went to his torturous death on the cross, Jesus spoke of his future reunion, in the Kingdom, with the Apostles and of course all his subsequent brothers and sisters in the faith. He discussed the coming Kingdom with them by promising them a thoroughly “political” future with him in the Kingdom which would come to power worldwide at his return. Luke 22:29-30 contains a magnificent encapsulation of the New Covenant. “Just as my Father has covenanted with me to give me a

Kingdom, so I now covenant with you to give you the Kingdom. You will be promoted to sit on twelve thrones to administer the [regathered] tribes of Israel.” This is a summary of the point of the Kingdom Gospel and the Christian objective.

The promise of a place in the future Kingdom was a privilege and a challenge. Jesus knew that as Messiah he was going to solve the international and personal problems of the world, and he invited his followers to take part with him in this venture. Like him, his followers were to become servant-administrators in the Kingdom. They were to endure various trials in the present chaotic age (Satan is said to be the god of the present nations, 2 Cor. 4:4). Then, after maintaining their faith steadily until the end of their lives or until Christ comes, they would by resurrection be brought back to life, given immortality and the joy of sharing in the worldwide Kingdom government with its headquarters in a renewed Jerusalem.

This plan gave and gives the greatest possible meaning to life now, and it enables those involved in it to endure suffering and setbacks knowing that God “works together for good in all things...for those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

The Loss of the Identity of Jesus

Fragmentation in the Church and the loss of the simple immortality program of God through Jesus is due to a huge shift away from the teachings of Jesus, which started soon after the death of the Apostles. The teaching of Jesus and his Apostles was gradually squandered under the influence of Greek, pagan philosophy, which interfered with the basic tenets of the Bible. The Greek philosophical mind confused the Hebraic realism of Scripture.

The God of both Testaments is the One God of Israel. The creed of Israel requires belief in One Person who is “the only true God.” This creed was designed to be a shield against any departure from the knowledge of the true God. Jesus himself in a final, memorable prayer in the presence of his disciples spoke of the essence of the immortality program as believing in the Father as “the only one who is truly God” and in himself, Jesus, as the *Messiah* whom that One God commissioned (John 17:3).

There is nothing complex about that creed. Had it remained intact, the history of the Church would have been quite different.

However, the Gentile mind of some early converts, after the death of the Apostles, eventually misunderstood the fact that the Son of God, Jesus, began to exist when God generated him in Mary (Luke 1:35). Based on a pagan view of the cosmos, these Gentiles finally contradicted the creed of Israel, which Jesus had

confirmed as the Christian creed and the most important of all beliefs in Mark 12:28-34.

These wrongly instructed converts gave to Jesus, no doubt in the name of “progress,” a pre-history which made him essentially non-human. The loss of Jesus the human being, the Son of God, began in the second century. Jesus was eventually turned into the Creator of the Genesis creation. He thus displaced his own Father, who had constantly insisted in the Old Testament Scriptures that He, alone and unaccompanied, was the actual Creator of all things (Isa. 44:24).

The first stage in the loss of the true identity of Jesus allowed him to be a created person, *but created before Genesis*. This drastic shift was enough to deprive Jesus of his actual status as a real human being beginning in the womb of his mother, as all humans do. The promised Messiah is the son of David, not a prehistoric person arriving from heaven!

Confusion over the Messiah Jesus and his identity was compounded by a subsequent revision by “church fathers” of the fourth century. It was then claimed for the first time that the Son of God was in fact an *uncreated* second member of the eternal Godhead. With this new twist, the unitarian creed of Israel and of Jesus (Mark 12:28-34) was threatened and perverted. It was necessary now to explain the inexplicable — how the One God could really be both Father and Son; how two (and later three, when the Holy Spirit was wrongly defined as a third Person) could really be One.

Using terminology borrowed from the world of pagan philosophy, it was now held, and enforced by a series of Church councils, that the Son of God had no beginning; that he was really God, and that he took on “impersonal human nature” in the womb of his mother. At this point, the Son was deprived of his human status. He was turned into God. There was really no son of David who came into existence in Mary. That lineal descendant of David, the promised Messiah, was replaced by an eternally existing Son of God, second member of a Triune God. Mary, under the new scheme, bore “human nature,” which is vastly different from the son of David!

To counteract the very obvious objection that the Church now believed in *two* who were both “eternal God,” the Church declared that God is one in “essence,” no longer, as the creed of the Bible had taught, one in Person.

This abandonment of the Jewish-Christian unitarian creed of Jesus led to untold confusion over terminology and resulted, after centuries of dispute, in an inscrutable “mystery” known as the doctrine of the Trinity. This new dogma, unknown to Jesus and the New Testament, and yet proclaimed in Jesus’ name, was enforced on pain of excommunication. It has remained the hallmark of what is

supposed to be genuine or “orthodox” Christianity. However, as many scholars know, it is highly improbable that Jesus would have recognized the Trinity as a creed faithful to the words of God in Scripture. Jesus never once claimed to *be* God!

An effective propaganda campaign has convinced unsuspecting church members that only those who are prepared to believe in the post-biblical, revised creed, the Trinity, and that Jesus is fully God and fully man, can be accepted as Christian.

Unfortunately, not only is this creed then forced into the Bible, sometimes even by mistranslation in some versions, but the Bible itself becomes very difficult to read intelligently, since Jesus and the Apostles did not believe in the Trinity. Jesus never claimed equality with God. He always expressed his subordination to God, his Creator and Father. He did, of course, claim a unique status which God had conferred on him, and he constantly expressed his complete dependence on the One God, his Father, for everything that he was able to achieve in pursuit of the will of God.

It has been Satan’s aim to oppose the will of God by denigrating the dignity and potential of the human beings whom God has created. Satan mounts his opposition to the amazing destiny and status of man in the service of God. The falsehood has been promulgated that Jesus, as Son of God, is “too good” to be a human being! His miracles, his extraordinary life and teaching are far beyond what any “mere” human person can achieve! God’s appointed human and sinless Savior has been judged insufficient to achieve our salvation. Jesus, in view of what he did and said, must be God! A human person cannot die for the sins of the world.

This argument makes an appeal to the religious imagination, no doubt, but it does not represent biblical teaching. The Bible is a unitarian document from cover to cover. It celebrates the fact that “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22) and the Jews, as everyone ought to know, believed that God was a single, undivided divine Person. Jews were urged for their whole history under God never to depart from this cardinal belief that God is one, not two or three.

The God of the Jews is also the God of the Gentiles. Paul stated this fact clearly in Romans 3:29. Not once did he ever hint at a revision of the biblical creed.

The doctrine of the Trinity also antagonizes a billion Muslims who have likewise been schooled for centuries never to depart from belief in God as a single divine Person. Both Jews and Muslims can correctly appeal to the Hebrew Bible, which with its thousands of singular personal pronouns describing God, informs us all that God is a single Person! To make this claim is simply to assert that one of the most fundamental laws of

communication — that single personal pronouns describe single persons — applies to the Bible as to all literature.

The post-biblical departure from the fundamental framework of the Bible which recognizes Jesus as the human Messiah and God as one Person was a disaster for the original Christian faith. With that early loss of Jesus’ identity as the Jewish Messiah of biblical prediction went also the loss of the Kingdom of God Gospel.

Again, under the influence of pagan philosophy, the goal of the Christians was shifted. A fundamental falsehood overcame the basic biblical truth that man is born a mortal being, subject to inevitable death. The falsehood was introduced from Platonic philosophy that man is innately immortal!

This mistaken teaching about the nature of us humans confused Jesus’ teaching about immortality. While the Church took on the pagan notion of inherent immortality, Jesus labored to instruct the public on how to achieve immortality, the immortality which none of us has by nature.

Jesus’ whole point, repeated constantly, was that we must “be born again” in order to achieve immortality in the future Kingdom of God on earth. Rebirth is achieved, Jesus taught everywhere, by our intelligent reception of his Kingdom Gospel message. In the parable of the sower Jesus pictured himself as sowing the essential seed of immortality, the secret of life forever. The Gospel of the Kingdom is defined as the “word” or message of God and it is also described as “the seed.” When that seed message of the Kingdom of God is planted in the hearts of receptive hearers and acted upon, the germ of life forever is placed within the believer. His spiritual eyes are opened by the divine teaching of Jesus. He becomes aware of his destiny as a candidate for life in the future Kingdom. The spirit of God and of Jesus is transmitted by that seed message. It is the spirit, mind and character of God, and it transmits a downpayment of the immortality which the Christian will gain fully in the resurrection when Jesus comes back.

The New Testament teaches that belief in Jesus and the Kingdom must be maintained until the end. There is no such doctrine as “once saved, always saved.” Salvation is a process beginning now and continuing to the end. “Salvation,” Paul said, “is now nearer to us than when we first believed” (Rom. 13:11). He warned converted Christians that if they did not remain in the faith, they would be “cut off” (Rom. 11:22). “Some believe for a while,” Jesus had warned (Luke 8:13), but only those who persist to the end will be saved (Matt. 24:13).

A number of traps await the young believer in our present confused religious world. Firstly the threat of confusing the terms of the New Covenant taught by Jesus

with the Old Covenant Law of Moses. Paul did not require his converts to observe Saturday as the Sabbath nor the Feasts of the Hebrew calendar. A major thrust of Paul's teaching was that the dividing wall which had separated Jew from Gentile was abolished in Christ (Eph. 2:15). Food laws given to Israel in Leviticus 11 were no longer valid (Rom. 14:14, 20, where Paul uses the very opposite word from that found in Lev. 11: "clean" as opposed to "unclean").

Sunday is not a new Sabbath day, but it is entirely appropriate for Christians to meet on that day in celebration of the resurrection. Acts 20:7 speaks of just such a meeting of believers "on the first day of the week." Jews in the synagogue met on the Sabbath and Paul attended such gatherings for the purpose of evangelizing. Synagogue meetings were not Christian gatherings, of course. The synagogue, as a whole, did not accept Jesus as the Messiah.

The New Testament Scriptures have been given to us in the Greek language. Arguments about an original Aramaic version are invalid. We have no original texts (autographs), but a large number of copies in Greek. Where corruptions have occurred the evidence usually remains. Arguments about the use of the divine name Yahweh, or how it was pronounced, are pointless. The exact pronunciation is not known, and the New Testament makes no special point about the importance of pronouncing God's name in Hebrew (or the name of Jesus in its Hebrew form). The inspired Greek manuscripts show that names may be legitimately transliterated into other languages.

Another danger for the new convert is pressure to "speak in tongues." In Acts the miracle of "tongues," which means real languages, not a series of meaningless syllables, involved a supernatural ability by the Apostles and those with them to speak languages they had never learned. The miracle was one of speaking, certainly not a miracle of hearing in the minds of the yet unconverted. The miracle was a demonstrable evidence that God was at work, and it identified the Apostles as the accredited agents of Jesus.

The language gift in 1 Corinthians 12-14 was listed as the least important and it was positively never intended for every believer. "Do all speak in tongues?" Paul asked. "By no means" (see 1 Cor. 12:30). Claims to these gifts today are ambiguous, since no one recognizes them certainly as real language. Tongues speakers often do not know what they are saying. By contrast, under Paul's supervision the gifts were unambiguous. Paul expected the "tongues-gifted person" to interpret *in public* what God was saying through him (1 Cor. 14:13). All the individual gifts are for the benefit of the Christian body. The miraculous healing of the New Testament was

administered without any medical intervention, and was on a scale unknown since. Paul was able to heal, without exception, all the sick on the island of Malta (Acts 28:9).

There are no Apostles among us today, at the level of Peter or the twelve or Paul. The Apostles were the foundation under Jesus of the New Testament church and the foundation cannot be relaid. We should of course all be disciples of the Apostles who faithfully represented the faith as taught by Jesus.

A further trap awaits the new believer. It is the theory that there are no supernatural evil personalities in Scripture, that Satan or the Devil is simply a metaphor for the evil which resides in human nature. The New Testament speaks with complete clarity of demons as non-human, supernatural intelligent beings. Jesus spoke to them and they spoke to him. They are always distinct from the unfortunate human persons whom they influence, the "demonized." To deny the existence of Satan as a fallen spirit being, or of the world of demons, is to erase a whole dimension of reality from the sacred text. It amounts to a refusal to believe in a major element of divine revelation in the Bible.

Perhaps most problematic of all is any theory of the Kingdom of God which defines it against the evidence of the New Testament. If the Kingdom is misunderstood, so automatically is the Gospel, which is the Gospel about the Kingdom. One large denomination, the Church of Christ, equates the Kingdom with the Church and creates a large confusion over the Gospel. They even propose that the Lord's prayer, "May Your Kingdom come" is no longer valid for us, since the Kingdom arrived at Pentecost when Jesus was seated with God in heaven.

The confusion of the Church with the Kingdom obscures the future Kingdom of God as seen by all the prophets. No text says that Christians have already inherited the Kingdom. Since the dead are now dead and not ruling with Christ, it is logically impossible for the Kingdom of God as the joint rule of Jesus with the faithful to be a fact of the present. The vast majority of Kingdom verses in the New Testament refer to the Kingdom which will be inaugurated at the return of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead. Revelation 11:15-18 is a golden text to preserve clarity on the Kingdom. Its arrival is at the seventh trumpet when the nation-states of the present system will become the Kingdom of God. Certainly, the Church is to be training now in readiness for the Kingdom of God when it comes. But the Kingdom in its proper sense remains future, although its blessings can be enjoyed in part now through the spirit of God and of Jesus which is said to be a "downpayment" of future immortality in the Kingdom.

Acts 1:5-7 provides a crystal clear testimony against the idea that the Kingdom of God was initiated when

Jesus went to sit at the right hand of the Father in heaven. In Acts 1:6 after Jesus had given a six-week seminar on his favorite subject, the Kingdom (Acts 1:3), the disciples who had already been preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom under Jesus' supervision asked the obvious question. Hearing that the spirit was to be poured out from heaven they supposed not unreasonably that the Kingdom of God was going to appear at the same time. They defined the Kingdom as Jesus had taught them. They thought of it as involving the restored tribes of Israel in the land. "Is it at this time," they asked, "that you are going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

Jesus did not in any way rebuke them for their good question. He simply informed them that the *time* for the coming of the Kingdom could not be known. The restoration of the Kingdom to Israel is taken for granted. The time which has to elapse before the Kingdom comes cannot be known. Note, however, this essential point which settles any question about the Kingdom in relation to the coming of the spirit. The spirit was to come "in a few days time" (Acts 1:5). But the Kingdom was to arrive at a time unknown (Acts 1:7). This proves obviously that the coming of the spirit at Pentecost is not the same event as the coming of the Kingdom.

More devastating in its effect on the Gospel is a theory known as Dispensationalism, or in its extreme form "ultra-Dispensationalism." These theories effectively divorce Jesus from the Gospel which he preached. They propose that Jesus, when he preached the Kingdom as Gospel, was talking to Jews under the Old Covenant and was not preaching the saving Gospel for us all!

Unger's Bible Dictionary in its entry "Gospel" speaks ambiguously of "two forms of the Gospel." These turn out to be two Gospels. The Gospel of the Kingdom, it is maintained, was meant by Jesus to be for Jews only. Paul, on the other hand, introduced the Gospel of grace which is for everyone now. But when the time of the future great tribulation comes, the Kingdom of God Gospel will be reinstated for people undergoing that period of unprecedented trouble.

The "ultra" form of this mistaken theory of the Gospel asks us to believe that the Kingdom was preached as Gospel until either Acts 13, even by Paul, or according to a variation on the same theory, until Acts 28. Subsequently, so says this amazing theory, Paul was given a final "sacred secret" revelation which provided the Gospel for those who happened to encounter Paul after this new revelation. This then would be the Gospel for us today.

Both forms of Dispensationalism are destructive of the New Testament Gospel. *Paul would have been under*

his own curse for destroying the Gospel (Gal. 1:8) if he had disobeyed the Great Commission by not preaching the same Gospel of the Kingdom which Jesus had authorized until he returns at the end of the age (Matt. 28:19, 20). Paul always preached the Gospel of the Kingdom as is seen by Acts 19:8, 20:24, 25 and 28:23, 31. He preached the same Kingdom Gospel to everyone. Acts 20:24, 25 settles once and for all (though the fact is obvious from the rest of the New Testament) that the Gospel of grace is *identical* with the Gospel of the Kingdom.

Finally, it is preposterous to imagine that Paul was given late in his life a special Gospel which superseded previous versions of the Gospel. Presumably he would have had to retrace his steps and tell the converts a new version of Christianity which he knew nothing about when he had been with them earlier!

Paul did not say that there was a Gospel revealed only to him, Paul. He said that the Gospel was revealed to the Apostles, plural (Eph. 3:5). There is no new mystery Gospel given to Paul while in prison. Jesus preached the mystery of the Kingdom and Paul spoke of the mystery before his imprisonment, in Romans 16:25. There is no difference at all between the body of Christ and the bride of Christ.

Happily, there is only one Gospel. Jesus was its first preacher (Heb. 2:3). It is the testimony of Jesus himself. That "testimony of Jesus" is the mark of the true believers according to Revelation 1:2, 9; 12:17; 19:10; 20:4.

Another massively influential teaching of Dispensationalism is a theory which invents an additional resurrection event not found in Scripture. According to the widely canvassed opinions of Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye (author of the *Left Behind* books, etc.), Jesus will come back secretly *seven years before* he comes back publicly to inaugurate the Kingdom on earth. The so-called "secret rapture" theory appeals to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. It maintains that the moment when the faithful dead are resurrected and the living Christians "raptured" or caught up to meet the Lord in the air can occur at any moment. Suddenly millions will disappear and for seven years those faithful will be in heaven with Jesus. After that, the public appearance of Jesus will occur. But 1 Thessalonians 4 says nothing at all about a secret pre-tribulation rapture/resurrection.

This "pre-tribulation" rapture/resurrection is a pleasant illusion, promising an escape to heaven for all believers prior to the time of great tribulation. The Bible does indeed speak of a future great tribulation just before the coming of Jesus to inaugurate the Kingdom (Matt. 24:21 = Dan. 12:1). But Scripture says no word at all

about an arrival of Jesus to resurrect the dead *before* the great tribulation.

Jesus' account of the future flatly contradicts the "left behind" theory. Jesus expressly said that "immediately *following* the great tribulation the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light...and the Son of Man will appear and gather his elect from the four corners of the world" (see Matt. 24:29-31). This is a post (=after) tribulation gathering of the faithful. Paul affirmed Jesus' understanding by urging his converts to expect release and relief from present sufferings "when the Lord Jesus Christ will be revealed from heaven in flaming fire taking vengeance on his enemies" (see 2 Thess. 1:7-8). Paul clearly did not expect release or an end to Christian suffering seven years earlier!

The Dispensationalist attempt to insert a "coming" of Jesus in secret does violence to Jesus' clear statement that he intends to gather the Christian "elect" *after* the great tribulation (Matt. 24:29-31). To say that the elect in Matthew 24:31 are not Christians is a symptom of the failure of the Dispensationalist system! They forget that the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 24 is for Christians. Any system which divorces Jesus from his own teaching stands self-condemned. Jesus taught the New Covenant and Christianity is based on Jesus and his teaching (2 John 7-9; 1 Tim. 6:3; Heb. 2:3).

Finally, students of the teaching of Jesus should be alerted to the dangers of Preterism (in its "partial" or "full" form). This theory proposes that the teaching of Jesus about his future coming was all fulfilled in AD 70. In its extreme form Preterism says that Paul spoke of AD 70 as the arrival of Jesus. In both forms of the theory the language of Jesus and Paul is to be read as metaphor and not taken literally.

These theories are to be rejected since the resurrection of the dead is to occur when Jesus returns, and obviously the dead were not raised to immortality to reign with Christ in AD 70!

There is a simplicity to the New Testament message. The Christian life is one of sexual purity, lack of hate, and loving service to God and man, a service characterized by the presentation of the Gospel of immortality in the Kingdom. There is One God, the Father, and Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, who is entitled to his unique status as "God's own Son," *the* Son of God, because of his miraculous beginning in the womb of Mary.

The Kingdom of God offers immortality to those who believe it and live in anticipation of its arrival at the return of Jesus to reign with the saints of all the ages on a renewed earth (Rev. 5:9, 10; Matt. 5:5).

Our basic premise, submitted to the public for examination, is that the churches have lost much of the

simplicity of the New Testament scheme of Gospel preaching and teaching. This has been the complaint also of countless scholars of church history and of the Bible. We conclude with just one valuable, eye-opening comment from a leading scholar of the Church of England:

"When the Greek and Roman mind came to dominate the Church, there occurred a disaster from which we have never recovered, neither in belief nor in practice" (H.L. Goudge, D.D.). ✧

Comments

"I just finished reading the first installment of your new book in *Focus on the Kingdom*, October, 2005. I found your style to be plain and simple and easily understandable for anyone competent in English at the 8th grade level. In my opinion, anyone with a Bible for reference should be able to follow your plain words about God's great plan." — *Texas*

"I want to thank you for the *Focus on the Kingdom* magazines. Although we are far away and life is very busy, I want you to know that I'm still learning more and more about our common hope. I'm more convinced that you hold a reliable view on Scripture far away from philosophical tradition. Nearly everyone sticks to traditional views. I am still looking on the internet for people who share the same beliefs as we do; I can't find any of them." — *Netherlands*

"I just wanted to take a moment to extend my gratitude to you for your labor of love in sharing the true gospel message of our Lord and coming Savior, Jesus the Christ of God. It has been a long road for me to put away the misguided teachings of 'The Way' ministry. I have learned to take from all of life's experiences some good and let the rest fall where it may. I did learn many things from 'The Way'; most of it was not related to true doctrine however, but the means by which to search the Scriptures to find it! For that I am thankful. I had purchased your book on the Trinity and shared it with others in my fellowship a while back. A few months later, our pastor invited you to speak with us in a small fellowship in Delaware about three years ago. Since that time we met, I have been challenged to 'search the Scriptures to see if those things are so.' As corny as it may sound, after 20 years of reading the Scriptures, I now read them afresh with an inheritance and Kingdom perspective that makes me weep like a baby sometimes! Without question, an incredible transformation has begun in my life and the seed message that was shared, I believe, has at least taken solid root. Baptism is my next step, but I'm simply struggling with the right baptisor." — *Arizona*

"Discovering what the Bible really says is so exciting. I appreciate all you've written, and others like you. God bless you. I won't be seeing you in heaven!" — *California*