

# Focus on the Kingdom

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Anthony Buzzard, editor

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## Our Recent Annual Conference

Over 100 people came from three countries to attend the 15<sup>th</sup> Theological Conference April 21-23. Greg Deuble, a former Church of Christ pastor from Australia, launched his new book *They Never Told Me This in Church! A Call to Read the Bible with New Eyes* (available at 800-347-4261 or 404-362-0052). Greg's book has already caused some thorough rethinking amongst friends. Ultimately we hope that a significant return to first-century Christianity may emerge. This will happen when churchgoers take it upon themselves to think deeply about the structure of the faith they have inherited, often without any of the healthy critical analysis we expect in every other field of knowledge.

Strangely, in that area in which knowledge is most precious, that of faith in Jesus, many have accepted without careful examination what they learned in church. They have somehow imbibed the idea that "theology," the study of God, is not a proper area of investigation for the church member. Critical faculties in that arena cease to function and "devotion" takes over. Often then Christianity is reduced to being "a good person."

Greg Deuble challenges his readers to a careful reexamination of their faith in the light of our Hebrew-Christian heritage. An eye-catching cover depicts a preacher holding up a Bible before his audience. His other hand is behind his back and he is holding a sheaf of pages, which have been removed from the Bible! Greg has already found a way into a major Australian Christian book chain and plans are afoot to achieve distribution in the equivalent bookstores in the USA. Positive reviews of Greg's book from several sources will help to capture the interest of a wide readership.

Anthony Buzzard's new book, *The Amazing Aims and Claims of Jesus: What You Didn't Learn in Church*, is also available. This book provides a simply-written account of the saving Gospel of the Kingdom message of Jesus. *The Amazing Aims and Claims of Jesus* is designed for the non-specialist. The first nine chapters are relatively short. The English is designed to be easy reading even for those whose mother tongue is not English. The single aim is to convey the meaning of God's purpose to confer immortality on those who love Him and respond to His unique Son's Gospel of the Kingdom. If any of our readers knows of a way to get this book into, say, Wal-Mart, or any other public place, let us know.

Our Kingdom colleagues in the UK have courageously pledged themselves to putting six Restoration Fellowship books in all the British public libraries. This will include the two books mentioned above. Ray and Carol Faircloth have adopted this plan for the coming months. They can be contacted at [refaircloth@msn.com](mailto:refaircloth@msn.com) if you would like to know more about this project.

With these two new books, one important theme of the conference began to emerge: publishing truth to the world. Robert Kelley from Ohio kicked off the weekend with his talk on "Delivering Truth to a Satanic World," including tips for publishing and publicizing books. His son Nathaniel Max Rock later gave a short presentation on book distribution.

Dan Gill, a pastor in Tennessee, presented a clear account of "The One Indivisible Gospel of Jesus Christ." Ray Faircloth from England demonstrated that "Christians Await the One-Time Return of Jesus." Ray was a Jehovah's Witness for 36 years and is now dedicated to using Scripture to point out that organization's errors. He has abandoned the complex and unscriptural JW system of two classes, the 144,000 who are supposed to be a group of "super-Christians," as distinct from the majority of ordinary JW believers whose destiny is to be on earth in the millennium, while the 144,000 rule from heaven with Jesus!

Lee Greer from California gave a presentation entitled "Deus sive natura: Ethical-Ecological Consequences of Our Views of God." Lee is a Seventh-Day Adventist who has recently come to the biblical unitarian position. He is currently finishing his PhD in biology at Loma Linda University. His extensive website [www.jesustheologyforum.org](http://www.jesustheologyforum.org) includes a detailed account of his new-found belief in Jesus as the human Messiah and in the Father as the "the only one who is truly God" (John 17:3).

John Roller's presentation "How Important Is Conditional Immortality?" emphasized the essential significance of this doctrine to all areas of our Christian faith. Robert Roberg of Florida engaged a significant element in our "Anabaptist" heritage. He challenged us to look at "The Root of Pacifism in the Hebrew Scriptures."

Alex Hall from England offered us his research in a paper entitled "When the Saints Go Marching In: God's Roadmap to Peace in the Middle East." Alex focused on the Scriptures that describe the Messianic march from the wilderness when Jesus returns. This, we feel, is a neglected part of the puzzle in end-time events and adds vividness

and reality to the amazing intervention of Jesus at his return. Anthony Buzzard closed the day on Saturday with “Equivalency as the Key to Making Sense of the Bible.” His point was that the Bible can be read in all its brilliant simplicity when readers understand that the NT writers use different terms to describe the same realities. The writers are united in the common theme: how to gain immortality by taking in the precious seed, the germ of life forever, provided by the Gospel of the Kingdom.

Throughout the weekend we also enjoyed fascinating 10-minute “faith stories” where people told us about their journey of faith — many of them “ex’s” from a variety of different groups. “Recovering ex’s” may be a more precise description.

On Sunday morning Dan Mages of California delivered a paper on “The Gospel of the Imminent Kingdom of God.” Dan is currently a student at Fuller Seminary. He is fortunate to be studying under Dr. Colin Brown, who was our keynote speaker two years ago. Kent Ross led the worship service and preached on “Test All Things! Hold Fast to the Good!”

We closed the conference with a moving baptism ceremony. Nine people chose to be baptized to wash away their former associations and begin their new life in Christ. One candidate, to whom the Gospel of the Kingdom was comparatively new, described her new-found understanding as an “epiphany,” truly a born-again experience, based on “seeing the Kingdom of God” (John 3).

Everyone is invited to next year’s Theological Conference (dates to be announced soon). DVDs and papers from this conference (see list on back page) are available from Atlanta Bible College (800-347-4261). ✧

## Reflections on the Theological Conference

by Alex Hall

I came to the Theological Conference for the first time four years ago. Since then I’ve made it my policy not to miss it, and it’s become one of the highlights of my year. I live in London and first came to embrace the Abrahamic faith around April 2001.

Very few people go to church in London, and those who do are often hostile towards us on account of our beliefs. Because of this it has been a tremendous blessing to us to find out that there are others who share this precious faith. I find the papers extremely stimulating and many of the issues raised in them give me food for thought through the rest of the year. I also gain inspiration for my ministry through dialogue with more mature believers who have studied the Bible in depth for many years.

Another major benefit of the conference is the fellowship which we enjoy during the break times and

evenings. It’s a chance to form links with people, which are often continued via email. I now have friends across the United States and other parts of the world. Many of these people don’t have the opportunity to fellowship locally, so they gain as much from the correspondence as I do.

I’ve found the attitude of conference goes to be very open, and we often get to discuss differing views in an honest and respectful way. Even if I don’t agree with everything I hear, I always get to learn more about other people’s beliefs and how they have come to their conclusions.

If you’re reading this and you haven’t been to the conference, why not give it a go? You’ll have the chance to meet interesting people from all over the world with fresh ideas and a love for the truth which is rare in this day and age. ✧

## On John 1:1

by Hans-Hermann and Olga Holst, Germany

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

These two Scripture verses are used by many Christians to confirm their long-held view that Jesus is God the Son.

I believe the statements of the Apostle John have to be viewed in connection with the statements of the Apostle Paul in his second letter to the congregation in Corinth, chapter 5 verse 19. There it says: “[through his Spirit] God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and he has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”

According to Jesus’ clear statement in John 4:24 that “God is spirit: and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth,” it is God, the Father, who indwells Jesus Christ through His spirit. Jesus himself says, “the Father who dwells in me, he performs the works.”

The Jewish Messiah and Son of the living God, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, never taught that he is *God the Son*. He always referred to himself as the Son of Man or Son of God. In John 20:17b he says, “I am ascending to my Father, and your Father, and to my God, and your God.” Here Jesus does not make a distinction between himself and those disciples whom he has redeemed by his blood. They all have One God as their Father. (Jesus of course was unique in having no human father.)

In Matthew 26:64 Jesus addresses the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem: “After this you will see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.” Luke 21:27 says: “And then they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

Jesus never taught that he would be sitting as God next to God.

Jesus Christ is the firstborn of God's new creation. The Apostle Paul writes about this in Romans 8:29: "For whom God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brethren." Jesus is the leader among many created sons.

Jesus Christ is seated as high priest and advocate at the right hand of the divine majesty and represents us before God. Jesus states very clearly in John 17:3: "And this is life eternal: that they might know You, the only one who is truly God, and Jesus Christ, whom You sent." God alone, who is mentioned in the Old Testament about 7000 times by name (*Yahweh*), and in the New Testament as Lord or God, deserves all the worship as God (Rev. 4:10, 11). Jesus is worshiped as the Messiah, not as God.

In John 1:1 the word *word* can be thought of equally well as *wisdom*. This would make sense considering Proverbs 8:22-36. "The Lord possessed me [Wisdom] at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. I was established from everlasting, from the beginning, before there was ever an earth...Then I was by Him, as one brought up with Him: and I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him" (Prov. 8:22, 23, 30). In Luke 11:49 the wisdom of God speaks.

In I Corinthians 1:30 Paul writes: "But of him you are in Christ Jesus, who has been made for us *wisdom* and righteousness and sanctification and redemption." In 1 Peter 1:20 the Apostle Peter writes the following about Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah and Son of God: "Who truly was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you."

As I now understand it from the Scriptures, *wisdom* was with God in the beginning and was manifested through Jesus Christ here on earth. Jesus is what the One God's *wisdom* became. Through the *wisdom/word/gospel* preaching of Jesus and his absolute and total obedience to the point of death on the stake at Jerusalem, the way back to the living God was restored. The veil of the temple was torn in two as a symbol of the completed work of redemption. God was indeed in the man Christ — not that God *was* Christ — reconciling the world to Himself. That process continues whenever a person decides to believe Jesus and his Gospel and be baptized into the community of faith. ✧

## A Glimpse of the Christian Future in the Kingdom

by Andy Szewczak

What will it feel like to be in the Kingdom of God on earth (Matt. 5:5; Rev. 5:10) when Jesus the man Messiah (1 Tim. 2:5) returns to earth from his righthand seat in heaven (Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20) in the future (1 Thess. 4:16, 17)? I hope that many who doubt can imagine what it will be like without the current pitfalls of life, when there is no Kingdom yet established. Let's project ourselves forward to the time when the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-4) will be fulfilled and he will receive the land as well, which he never did (Acts 7:5).

Imagine...waking up one day and realizing that there is no more war *ever*. Imagine that the very thought of gunfire going off is now gone, and unthinkable. It is not even possible to hear it ever again. No one will contemplate killing a colleague human being destined for immortality. Think of how much more relaxed you will feel being able to walk the earth knowing that a bullet cannot strike you at all. You are impervious to all this. All the swords and guns, spears and bombs will be turned into farming equipment to till the earth, as surely we were meant to do (all of us). Yes, Yahweh placed us here originally for the purpose of running the world properly. The place in which He made man was a garden. And man was made from that garden (soil) of the earth. He is part of it. The first Adam was made in the form or image of God (Gen. 1:26) and the second Adam (Jesus) was also made in the form or image of God (1 Cor. 15:45; Phil. 2:6).

Life will no longer be a busybody affair of commodity and stocks. Military jets are obviously part of this association as well. No more hectic business will need to be done in such a rapid, "push push" concern for wealth, for there will be all the time necessary to accomplish anything in the will of God that needs to be done by man under the sun.

The fruits and vegetables of the land will taste so rich in pure minerals and be the most satisfying taste ever, since only perfect hands made anew in the body of Messiah will be tending to their cultivation and care. The water that feeds them will be of the purest content, with no harsh chemicals or pesticides added. There will be no pests. The plagues on mankind will be gone! Premature death will be impossible, except for the incorrigible sinner.

"And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child will lead them" (Isa. 11:6).

"The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and dust will be the serpent's food. They will not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, says Yahweh. The earth will be full of the

knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea” (Isa 65:25; 11:9).

These are obvious signs that the Kingdom is to be on earth and that humans and animals will not be playing harps in heaven...

I, for one, will be happy to stop using this computer, and start working out in the sun, which will no longer be able to cause cancer to my flesh, or hurt me if I am out in it too long since our ozone layer will be restored to the way it was before all the aerosol cans, styrofoam, power plants, and catalytic converters destroyed it.

One thing is for certain: if we keep dwelling upon the downfalls of society today, we are led into the dark path of the evil one, and we will definitely fall...We cannot be focused on matters of unimportance when the light of the truth is here for us to keep first and foremost in all our affairs. We must preach the word of the Kingdom, and do it with spirit and truth, having a real zeal for our calling.

“Be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day will not come on you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of all the earth. But keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:34-36).

“And so I solemnly urge you before God and before Christ Jesus — who will someday judge the living and the dead when he appears to set up his Kingdom: Preach the word of God. Be persistent, whether the time is favorable or not. Patiently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with good teaching. For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to right teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever they want to hear. They will reject the truth and follow strange myths. But you should keep a clear mind in every situation. Don’t be afraid of suffering for the Lord. Work at bringing others to Christ. Complete the ministry God has given you” (2 Tim. 4:1-5).

I offer this to my fellow Kingdom believers with great love in hope of Christ and his coming Kingdom. ✧

## Keeping Our Eyes and Their Eyes on the Goal

by Bruce Lyon

**H**ere is something that might catch your kids’ attention, depending on their age level. My son is 11 and my daughter is 9 and they thought it was something to think about.

Notice the following verses:

“For truly against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You *anointed*, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together” (Acts 4:27).

“God *anointed* Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:38).

“You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, your God, has *anointed* you with the oil of gladness more than your companions” (Heb. 1:9).

When God *anointed* Jesus with the holy spirit from the moment of his conception, he was the Messiah designate, entering on his full Messianic mission from his baptism. Now notice that the same applies to us:

“Now He who establishes us with you in the Messiah and has *anointed* us is God” (2 Cor. 1:21).

We too are *anointed*, “messiah,” and that means we will have positions of authority under the Lord Messiah Jesus (Luke 2:11) in the coming Kingdom of God. We are now to prepare for those positions of rulership which will be assigned to us by the Lord Messiah Jesus, beginning at our resurrection to participation in his glorious rule, centered at Jerusalem, and expanding from there. Daniel was told to expect resurrection after the sleep of death, so that he could receive his promised assignment as a royal person (Dan. 12:13).

Kids become goal-oriented if we give them something to strive for, just like us. They see the conditions around them now — the war, terrorism, hatred, violence, broken homes, immorality everywhere. We can show them how wondrous it is going to be in the coming new age and how they can be a part of the solution to this world’s ills. They should prepare now for that future Kingdom career.

Get them to read Isaiah and other biblical passages which speak about little children with a lion. My daughter wants to be a vet; she loves animals, and that idea appeals to her. Wild animals will no longer be dangerous. There will be no more poisonous spiders and snakes. There will be major climate changes that will put things back to the way they were when they were first created, before Adam’s catastrophic decision to go against God’s decree not to eat the fruit of the tree of good and evil. Tell them they can be part of bringing about, at the Second Coming, the most dramatic change that will ever occur on the face of the earth. As members of the Messiah’s church, the royal family now in training for office, the separated assembly of God who, in spirit, have entered into the new age, the coming Kingdom of God (Col. 1:13), they can live everyday with that noble goal in mind. ✧

## What Is the Main Thing?

“The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” So I have heard from advocates of good method in business or in life.

Playing off that idea, I propose that the Devil, “who is the deceiver of the whole world,” “the whole world lies in his power,” is bent on keeping the main thing out of sight. He is not keen for you to know what “the main thing” is.

His technique was brilliantly spotted and exposed by Jesus when the master rabbi said: “When anyone hears the message [about the Kingdom of God, Matt. 13:19] the Devil comes and snatches away the message which is sown in their hearts so that they cannot believe it and be saved” (Luke 8:12).

One would think that the main thing would be to understand why Jesus thought he had been commissioned by God and what he saw as his total purpose. If so then Luke 4:43 would have to rate as a key starting point for finding out God’s will for our lives as united in purpose with His Son: “I came to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom...that is the reason God sent me.” Are we doing that? Have you heard sermons on that verse as regular fare in church?

One would think that the main thing would be to understand how immortality (which human beings are not born with) is to be obtained. One would expect the central Gospel parable about the seed of immortality to be the prominent element in the preaching of all churches. But is it? If not, why not?

The main thing, according to Jesus, who was and is the walking embodiment of God’s wisdom, that is, God’s wise plan for us humans, is to *seek as first priority the Kingdom of God* (Matt. 6:33), to be disciples of the Kingdom of God (Matt. 13:52), to pray first of all that the future Kingdom may come into existence on earth (Matt. 6:10) and to take part in the proclamation of Jesus’ Kingdom Gospel (Matt. 28:19, 20). All else in life is secondary. Jesus is and was a one-goal person. He warned even that love of family above love of him and his Gospel can be a snare and delusion. He who loves father and mother more than me cannot be my student, he said. “If you want to be my follower you must love me more than your own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters — yes, more than your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. And you cannot be my disciple if you do not carry your own cross and follow me” (Luke 14:26, 27).

Tough words, indeed, but eminently realistic. What can compare in importance with you and your immortality? You can gain it or miss out. The main thing is that we do not miss out on immortality. “What will a man gain by obtaining the whole world and losing his own life?” (Matt. 16:26).

Jesus was relentlessly focused on the main point.

I have tried to point out in this magazine (since 1998) and at our website ([restorationfellowship.org](http://restorationfellowship.org)) and in our various books that the churches have not successfully kept the main thing the main thing. In other words, when the Bible is read (which does not happen very extensively in the lives of many churchgoers) readers read right past the most glaringly obvious (once one sees it) teachings of Jesus about the importance of the main thing.

I have found it helpful for my own understanding to try to see how this is possible. Other documents are not so treated. Most people do not read right over the main thing in a “do-it-yourself” manual. Instruction books of all types do their best to convey the essential information needed for users. But somehow, when the words of Jesus are put to the public, they are liable to be veiled in a spiritual fog. Jesus’ teachings, though originally offered by the Messiah to ordinary people of many different walks of life, do not hit home to the brain. There is a blockage. Non-comprehension results. Isaiah said it well:

“The entire vision will be to you like the words of a sealed book, which when they give it to the one who is literate, saying, ‘Please read this,’ he will say, ‘I cannot, for it is sealed.’ Then the book will be given to the one who is illiterate, saying, ‘Please read this.’ And he will say, ‘I cannot read.’ Then the Lord said, ‘Because this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote’” (29:11-13).

How is this possible? Firstly because there is a Devil, an intelligent fallen being who opposes God to the limits of the permission given him. As the prince of the power of the sub-lunar space he is revealed by Scripture as controlling a host of demonic forces who go about their business of confusing the precious words of Truth contained in the Bible. (One of the major coups of the Devil was to convince some that he does not exist at all! To many Bible readers, this concept will be unimaginable, but whole communities, once they put their trust in a chosen founder, can be persuaded to believe almost anything, however improbable. Indoctrination is particularly effective and devastatingly powerful when inflicted by beloved teachers on young, tender minds. Only spiritual “surgery” and a desire to become undeceived whatever the cost can remedy that situation. And for “ex’s” of all sorts the strong arm of control remains sometimes on the convert even after he has ceased to be a member of a given cult.)

So in terms of the “problem” of how the faith of Jesus and the New Testament has become so fragmented and confused, what is the underlying cause? What is the main thing to be grasped, if we are to come to a sensible understanding of Jesus and salvation?

I suggest that leading scholars today put their finger on the right issue, though they may not be as helpful in supplying the biblical answer to the problem they rightly identify. Here is what I mean. I offer this as an issue to be carefully considered.

In his major work on Jesus, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Fortress Press, 1996), the celebrated Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, tells us with admirable candor: “In one sense I have been working on this book on and off for most of my life. **Serious thought began, however, when I**

was invited in 1978 to give a lecture in Cambridge on 'The Gospel in the Gospels.' The topic was not just impossibly vast; **I did not understand it.** I had no real answer, then, to the question of how Jesus' whole life, not just his death on the cross in isolation, was somehow 'gospel.'"

If ever "the main thing" was highlighted with brilliant clarity, this has to be it! That indeed is *the* problem with Christianity as we have had it described to us. It is a demonstrable fact that what *we* in churches call the Christian Gospel is not actually the Gospel as defined by Jesus (and Paul). Bishop Wright has absolutely and correctly hit the nail on the head. He says that he had no answer to the question of "the Gospel in the Gospels." The fact is that the Church and his theological training had not taught him what the Gospel in the gospels is. The Church had so structured its creeds and systematic theology that the "the Gospel in the gospels" was not a subject for discussion or inquiry! It was tacitly ruled out of court as a legitimate concern for would-be preachers and evangelists. Thus of course it was not a proper subject of conversation among churchgoers sitting at the feet of their chosen theological mentors.

After all, the creeds hustled right over the Gospel ministry of Jesus, rushing from his supernatural birth to his death, as though what happened in between (no less than the secret of immortality offered by Jesus!) did not matter. Remember these words? I believe in Jesus "who was born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified..."

Is that all that really counts? Or is the main thing missing?

Here is how the mess has occurred. Luther is a main source of Protestant Christianity. *He did not go to the words of Jesus to find the Gospel.* He went to Paul mainly in Romans. This is a curious way to "do" the Christian faith. Do students of Plato or Aristotle go first to those men to find out about their teaching? Who said that Paul is the founder of Christianity? Certainly not the Bible! Paul is an apostolic representative of Jesus, certainly, and in his letters he comments on all sorts of Christian issues, but he is not the first preacher of the Gospel. Jesus is (though the Gospel was also preached in advance to Abraham, Gal. 3:8). Paul in fact can be seen preaching, in Acts, exactly the same Gospel of the Kingdom as Jesus (19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). But no one starts in Acts to find out about Paul, though they should.

The result of this gigantic ecclesiastical muddle is reflected in N.T. Wright's honest confession that he did not even understand how to tackle the issue of "the Gospel in the gospels." No wonder. No one in the Church had told him about the Gospel in the gospels. His later research and writing has been dedicated to working at the Gospel in the gospels. His historical knowledge is

certainly a blessing to us all, though I doubt if he has really done justice to the issue, in all its simplicity. It is still not clear from his writings what the Gospel in the gospels is. He even thinks that the Second Coming (*Parousia*) of Jesus in the gospels happened in AD 70! But is this not to initiate another huge muddle, making Paul and Jesus mean entirely different things by *Parousia*? While attempting to unscramble muddles, has the Bishop on this issue not plunged us into another daunting muddle?

Meanwhile C.S. Lewis, read by millions, is quite sure that *Jesus was not the preacher of the Gospel!* The Gospel is not in the gospels, he declares resoundingly. This is really astonishing. But it helpfully enables us to put our finger on the "main thing" in terms of the trouble and confusion in churches. Listen to C.S. Lewis in *Letters to Young Churches*:

"The epistles are for the most part the earliest Christian documents we possess. The Gospels come later. **The Gospels are not 'the gospel,' the statement of the Christian belief.** They are written for those who had already been converted, who had already accepted "the gospel." They leave out many of the complications (that is the theology) because they are intended for readers who have already been instructed in it. In that sense the epistles are *more primitive and more central than the Gospels* — though not of course than the great *events* which the Gospels recount. God's act (the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection) comes first: the earliest theological analysis of it comes in the epistles; then, when the generation who had known the Lord was dying out, the Gospels were composed to provide for believers **a record of the great Act and of some of the Lord's sayings.**"<sup>1</sup>

"**The gospels are not the Gospel.**" I suggest that this is one of the most extraordinary pieces of biblical misinformation on record. But its pervasive effects are illustrated by Bishop Wright's admission that the question about "The Gospel in the gospels" left him at a loss for words. He did not know what to say about the Gospel found in the gospels.

C.S. Lewis is, however, only building on his unstable Reformation heritage from Luther. Here are the words of Luther, who did not think that the Gospel is found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. No wonder that Tom Wright quails at the question of the Gospel in the gospels. Luther, it is true, liked John, but note how he dismisses the one Gospel of the Kingdom repeated in three versions, Matthew's, Mark's and Luke's:

"John's Gospel is the one, tender, true chief Gospel, far, far to be preferred to the other three and placed high above them. So, too, the Epistles of St. Paul and St. Peter far surpass the other three Gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke...In a word, St. John's Gospel and his first Epistle,

<sup>1</sup> J.B. Phillips, intro. p. 10.

St. Paul's Epistles, especially Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first Epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and good for you to know, *even though you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine*. Therefore St. James' Epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to them; for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it."

Let us tackle the main thing head on. It needs to be established as the first key to understanding the Christian faith that Jesus was indeed the first exponent of the saving Christian Gospel. Hebrews 2:1-4 is fair warning, but it has gone unheeded:

"For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty; how will we escape if we neglect so great a **salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord**, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will."

There it is. The main thing. The Gospel was "first preached by Jesus." Therefore go to the gospels to find the Gospel. C.S. Lewis really got it wrong here and so apparently did Luther. Hebrews adds, unpacking the exhortation further: "For God did not subject the world to come, about which we speak, to angels" (Heb. 2:5). The point is that God has determined to subject the future age of world history, the Kingdom of God, not to angels, but to Jesus and his followers (Dan. 7:18, 22, 27; Rev. 5:10; 20:1-6, etc.). Quite a destiny!

Historian G.F. Moore wrote (my comments in square brackets): "**Luther** created by a dogmatic criterion a canon of the gospel within the canon of the books [he chose some books and ignored others, using a selective and misleading procedure]. It is clear that the infallibility of Scripture has here, in fact if not in [Luther's] admission, followed the infallibility of popes and councils; for the Scripture itself has to submit to be judged by the ultimate criterion of its accord with Luther's doctrine of justification by faith."<sup>2</sup> [Luther, in other words, replaced one dogmatic system with another, making the Scripture submit to his own process of selection.]

The casualty in this arbitrary procedure was the Christian Gospel of the Kingdom, the Gospel in the gospels. Is that a small matter? I think not. If (1) we are to be judged by our confident adherence to the words of Jesus ("For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when he comes in the glory of his

Father with the holy angels," Mark 8:38); and if (2) Jesus was the model preacher of the Gospel, and if (3) denying the words of Jesus is the ultimate pitfall (I Tim. 6:3), then should not all spotlights be turned urgently on getting the Gospel defined properly from the words of our master rabbi Jesus?

We urge readers to appeal to their preachers to preach them **the Gospel from the gospels** and not to leave those immortal words of Jesus alone until the Gospel has been preached from them. Then only can we be assured that we have really heard *the* Gospel. As long as the misleading words of C.S. Lewis and Luther prevail, surely the Gospel is put into a fog. And while the spiritual atmosphere of churches is contaminated, what chance is there of the church really impacting the godless world?

Returning to other words of Bishop Wright, it is encouraging to hear him say, on a related Gospel topic, that "my fear is that we have been simply drifting into a muddle and a mess putting together bits and pieces of traditions, ideas, and practices in the hope they will make sense. They don't... We should remember especially that the use of the word 'heaven' to denote the ultimate goal of the redeemed, though hugely emphasized by medieval piety, mystery plays and the like and still almost universally at a popular level, is severely misleading and does not begin to do justice to the Christian hope."<sup>3</sup>

May the revolution begin, to bring about what is only reasonable service to the Messiah we profess to love: the abandonment of pagan piety about "heaven for disembodied souls," and a gutted Gospel which, carelessly resting on the Reformation which was very partial and inadequate, denies to Jesus his supreme position as *preacher* of the saving Kingdom Gospel, *as well as* dying for it and for us. ✧

## Comments

"I purchased your book *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound* from Atlanta Bible College and found it to be an excellent read and study. Do you know where I could obtain a New Testament translated from a Hebraic, non-Trinitarian perspective?" — *New Zealand*

*As far as I know there is no such translation, but many commentaries and journal articles provide the right guides to a Hebraic understanding of Jesus and his Kingdom Gospel. Our own translation of John's Gospel may be useful. We started it in previous editions of the Focus magazine and God willing we will complete it, as time allows. — Editor*

<sup>2</sup>Moore, *History of Religions*, Scribners, 1920, p. 320.

<sup>3</sup> *For All the Saints*, p. 21.