

# Focus on the Kingdom

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## Basic Biblical Christology for Unitarian Christians

by Anthony DeMarco

Is Jesus God? To most Christians for the past 1700 years, the answer has been a firm Yes. To them, the question was settled in the fourth century at the Council of Nicea, which proclaimed Christ to be “God of God, Light of Light...of one essence with the Father” in its Christological creed (Christology being the study of Christ’s nature). Not everyone agreed and, to this day, many people dissent. We, of course, are in that minority. As a result, we unitarians are frequently accused of demeaning Jesus by disagreeing with the creed.

In fact, many of us were not always unitarians; we may have been raised in a Trinitarian household. When we first learn that Jesus is not the Supreme Being, we *can* indeed easily come to think less of him, and this is what happened with the unitarian movements that later became Transcendentalism and Unitarian Universalism. Nevertheless, the first unitarians in America were all passionate Christians; open-minded and liberal to be sure, but all were deeply devoted to Christ and God. Undeniably, it was this intense devotion that led them to unitarian affirmations: to reject the doctrine of the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ.

Scholarship has come quite a long way since the unitarian “Enlightenment.” We have learned things about Jesus and his times that were unknown to the early unitarians. And we have learned much more about the Bible itself.

So how can we, as unitarian Christians, say Biblically correct things about Jesus? Clearly, we have to get back to what the Bible has to say about Christ. Such a study is beyond the scope of this paper. For the time, we will simply focus on the works of Paul whose beliefs represent the original Jerusalem churches’.

For Paul, Jesus is not God, but he is God’s Son; God’s image. As such, Christ reveals God to us, but he also reveals God’s will for humanity in an unprecedented way. These are things the early unitarian pioneers all affirmed. But only tangentially did they touch on another extremely important aspect of Paul’s Christology: *the fact that Christ accomplishes for God what only God gets to do*. This is the womb from which Trinitarian theology emerged; but this is also where we can most easily see the mistakes made by Trinitarians. For when we study what Christ *did* in his crucifixion and

resurrection, and when we study what he currently *does* at the right hand of God, can we find Christ’s staggering significance woven together with his clear inferiority to God. This is what we must now explore.

Throughout the Old Testament, God promised that one day, He would renew His covenant with Israel, forgive their sins, and defeat evil. (Though the number of passages that discuss this are far too many to list, Deuteronomy 24 is a good place for the reader to look to get these ideas firmly implanted mentally.) But throughout Paul, and even the Synoptics, we see that all these things occurred *in Christ*. Jesus renewed the covenant; Jesus’ death and resurrection accomplished the saving act of God by forgiving the sins of the world and defeating evil. In other words, Christ had done what only God could do.

This saving act Christ accomplished on earth — but currently he is in heaven at the right hand of the Father. What’s he doing now? The answer is striking, breathtaking, and amazing: Christ currently functions *as God*. Many of Christ’s functions are duties God either used to take or was supposed to take. We begin with Philippians 2:9: “For this reason [Christ’s humility], God highly exalted him and gave him the Name that is above every name.” Two main questions stem from this verse: What is “the Name,” and what does its bestowal on Jesus mean? First, “the Name that is above every name” would undoubtedly be understood as a euphemism for God’s own not-to-be-pronounced Name, YHWH (probably pronounced as YAH-weh). That is to say, Jesus has received God’s own unique Name. But second, this does not mean Jesus changed his name to God’s, as when my wife changed her last name to mine. In ancient Jewish culture, when someone was bequeathed a new name, this meant his function or status had changed. The point of the verse, therefore, is that Jesus now functions accordingly with anything associated with the Name, YHWH; he is *functionally* God. He functions for God without of course *being* God Himself, because God is only One Person. Simply put, God exalted Jesus to His right hand and bestowed on him His own unique Lordship and Office.

It is not surprising, then, to find Christ acting correspondingly. Clearly, there is a “functional overlap” between God and Christ, who now exercises divine prerogatives. There are many examples of this, but a few will do for our purposes. In Romans 10:13, Paul says that “everyone who calls upon the Name of the Lord will

indeed be saved.” This verse is a direct quotation from Joel 2:32 which envisioned “everyone” calling on the *Lord God* for salvation. This accomplishment, though, Paul now attributes to *Jesus*, who is the lord of Romans 10:13. Clearly, Christ stands *in loco Dei*; that is, in the place of God. Similarly, Paul can speak of the “judgment seat” of God and Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). Even more striking, he takes up the well-known Old Testament theme of the “Day of the Lord,” which envisioned God coming to earth to bring divine judgment, and understands the lord in question as Christ who acts in God’s role as His agent or representative. Again, we can see an arresting functional overlap.

Equally significant is another passage, 1 Corinthians 15:45: “the first Adam became a living soul...the last Adam (Christ) became a life-giving Spirit.” Paul’s readers could hardly have failed to notice the obvious: that he has just attributed the function of “life-giving Spirit” to Christ. To “give life” was always the job of the Holy Spirit, who is not a *person* per se, but God Himself in His outreach to humankind. And yet, in Paul’s thought, this task has been taken up by the exalted Christ.

Therefore, whether it was in his existence on earth or his post-existence at the right hand of God, Christ does what only God can do. Yet, he is constantly distinguished from God. Never is the title “God” given to him,<sup>1</sup> and even though he has the Name, this was bestowed on him *by God*; it is not his by nature. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8:6 that there is “one God...and one Lord.” There are two choices we can now make. We can say that the reason Paul can attribute divine functions to Christ is because God is a Trinity, thereby ignoring Christ’s essential inferiority to God, or we can resolve the tension the way Paul does: Christ can function this way *precisely because he was authorized by God to do so*. To be sure, Christ functions in ways in which he is clearly aligned with the one God. Nevertheless, our Christology never says more than that Christ is God’s agent; His representative; or His functionary. This is an extremely exalted way of speaking about Christ; to say he is functionally God is to say things about him that we can say of none other. But the earliest people who made such formulations did not take it the further step into the confusing territory of the Trinity.

Earlier I mentioned that no intermediary would do; only “the arm of the Lord” could accomplish for God what only God could do. This is undoubtedly true. Here we see the heart of the unitarian controversy. For while unitarians wished to dispute the claim that God was a

<sup>1</sup> The one exception may be Rom. 9:5, but clearly Christ’s function as God is what is in view. Issues of punctuation make the reference of God to Jesus uncertain. [Other texts applying the word “God” in a secondary sense to Jesus are Heb. 1:8 and John 20:28 — *ed.*]

Trinity and that Christ was therefore dual-natured, they likewise upheld the idea that Jesus, precisely as a *man*, was created to fulfill the role of God. Let me explain this.

We must approach the Bible as a grand narrative. From first to last, an enormous story is being told. God created all things; all things have become corrupt; God will restore all things. Scripture affirms that this act of restoration would be the work of God Himself. But the central figure in this drama is no longer God, but Jesus. Or rather, as I am convinced we must say, Christ existed solely to be, in his function, *God* for the world. God is transcendent; He cannot be beheld lest the beholder instantly disintegrate. So if He is going to act in history, He must do so through a chosen agent. But not just any agent will do; this is a job for God himself. God therefore created Jesus to be His personal representative on earth, to do for Him what only He alone can do. Jesus was born for this purpose. And what is more, if Paul can believe such things and arrive at neither a Trinitarian theology nor a belief in a dual-natured-Jesus, neither should we.

Therefore, we can reclaim Paul’s Christology, and can add more to the unitarian debates, things that hitherto were unknown to our spiritual pioneers. Christ was and is a man; his existence began in the womb of Mary. He worshipped, loved, and prayed to his God, and any equality he claimed was a functional equality (Phil. 2:6). But he is thus the one who *fulfills the role of God*; precisely as a man — no more, no less — he embodies the saving power of God Himself. He completes the tasks which only God can do. And this is because it was always God’s intention that He, through Christ, would complete the grand work of salvation prophesied millennia ago. As unitarians, knowing and believing this, we cannot add more to Scripture by affirming the words of the Nicene Creed; but moreover, as unitarian Christians, neither can we ever be accused of demeaning our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. ✧

## “Absent from the body and present with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8)

This phrase is commonly used to teach that at death a Christian transcends this world to be with Jesus in a bodiless state. But a bodiless state is definitely not what Paul desires. He affirmed that the one thing he did not desire was to be “unclothed,” i.e. disembodied. Paul points to the new body, an immortal body which we “will be clothed with our house which is from heaven” (2 Cor. 5:2).

An immortal soul or spirit that survives the body as the living, functioning, essential person results from the Greek influence that entered the Church centuries ago (actually from the 2nd century) and has devastated the gospel message. Paul uses the same expression about being “clothed” in 1 Corinthians 15:54 (NIV) and

explains the sequence of events by which we achieve immortality. Immortality is acquired, not at the time of death, but at the resurrection when Jesus returns. The context both in this popular passage (2 Cor. 5:1-5) and in 1 Corinthians 15:53 along with many Bible texts gives us “the rest of the story.” As they say, a text without a context is often a pretext. 2 Corinthians 5:8 has been yanked from its context and made to say what it cannot possibly mean. Our reward (2 Tim. 4:8; Rev. 22:12) is to be raised from death (1 Cor. 15:23) at Christ’s return. Our entrance into the eternal kingdom of God and His Christ (2 Tim. 4:1; 2 Pet. 1:11) must also await his return. However this single phrase in 2 Corinthians 5:8 is constantly quoted to prove that *at death* Christians immediately go to their reward in heaven in a disembodied state without benefit of Jesus’ return or the resurrection. Such an idea contradicts the rest of the New Testament and expressly Jesus’ statement that rewards occur “at the resurrection of the just” (Luke 14:14) and “when the Son of Man comes in glory” (Matt. 16:27).

Paul begins his discussion in 2 Corinthians 5 simply by explaining his desire to be absent from this present body, this frail, mortal, dying body in which we “groan” (v. 4; cp. “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Rom. 7:24). Paul desires to be “clothed with our heavenly dwelling...because we do not wish to be unclothed [absent from the body] but to be clothed” (2 Cor. 5:2, 4), i.e., with our resurrected body (1 Cor. 15:21-23). To represent this temporal body, Paul uses figures such as “earthly tent” and “tent.” To represent our resurrected, undying body he uses more substantial figures such as “building,” “eternal house in heaven” and “heavenly dwelling” (twice).

Indeed, when we die this present earthly (mortal) body is “destroyed” (v. 1). That in itself is not what Paul desires. That condition is likened to being “unclothed” and “naked” (having nothing). To the contrary, Paul desires the opposite of “unclothed” and “naked.” He desires to be “clothed,” dressed up, so to speak, in our “heavenly dwelling.” “Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked” (vv. 2-3).

The great resurrection chapter in 1 Corinthians 15 explains this further. “For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’” (1 Cor. 15:53-54). Compare this with our text: “what is mortal will be swallowed up by life” (2 Cor. 5: 4).

Our hope is not to become a disembodied spirit. Our hope is to have a new body, a substantial body, a “glorious body.” For that, we must wait for Jesus to come

from heaven. “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:20-21). Paul was expressing his longing to be absent from this present “body of death.” He consistently desired the moment when he and all the believers will be present with the Lord, because to be present with the Lord is to be in possession of a body like his. Christians look forward to being present with Jesus *at his return*, equipped then with a new spiritual body. Only by this process can we come to be with the Lord. Paul said exactly that, too, in 1 Thessalonians 4:17: “**In this way** [and by no other] we will always be with the Lord.” ✧

## Holy Spirit and Word

The holy spirit or spirit of God or of Jesus is the expression used in the Bible to describe the operational presence and power of God. It is God extending Himself to work in His own creation in various ways. The spirit of God is highly personal, as coming from the Person of God or from the Messiah. But the holy spirit is not a third Person of a Trinity. No one addresses the holy spirit in the Bible. No one prays to the holy spirit or worships the holy spirit. It is unbiblical to say, “Come, holy spirit.” One could be calling on an alien spirit.

The Bible uses various words as virtual synonyms. It is very common in Scripture to find writers repeating themselves with slightly varied phrases. An example: “Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight” (Isa. 40:3). One phrase amplifies the other. Or “that you be united in the same mind and the same understanding” (1 Cor. 1:10). Mind and understanding convey more or less the same idea here.

Jesus was a master at repeating a point by stating it positively and negatively: “If anyone hears my sayings and does not keep them...He who rejects me and does not receive my sayings...” (John 12:47, 48). To teach truth effectively one must state it positively and negatively. God is one and God is *not* a Trinity. It is a pleasant illusion to suppose that people will understand us if we state only the positive. The degree of confusion we are trying to undo requires both positive and negative assertions. “The truth is...” “It is false that...”

“Spirit” is very close in meaning to “mind.” Here is how one can show this. Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:16 quotes from the Greek version (the LXX) of Isaiah 40:13. He asks, “Who has known the **mind** of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? But we have the **mind** of Christ.” Now note the Hebrew of the same text: “Who has directed the **spirit** of the LORD or as His counselor has informed him?” (Isa. 40:13). Mind and spirit are interchanged here. Paul knew that the Hebrew version spoke of the spirit of the LORD. But mind is virtually the same thing and he

happily quotes the LXX version which has “mind” for “spirit.” The meaning is the same.

The spirit of God and of man is the conglomeration of ideas and words and experiences which make up the mind. Our task as Christians is to assimilate the mind of Christ, which is the mind of God, his Father. Paul said, “Let this mind be in you which was in Messiah Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). He could just as well have said, “Let the spirit of Jesus dwell in you.” Paul also said, “Let the **word** [Gospel] of Messiah dwell in you richly” (Col. 3:16, and the meaning is really the same.

As Christians we are to assimilate the mind, heart and spirit of God and of Jesus. We do this by exposing ourselves constantly to the words of Jesus and of Scripture and thus to the Gospel of the Kingdom words of Jesus. Taking these words into us, by regular reading, meditation and “digestion,” we learn, as Jesus said, “to chew on” Jesus, to feed on him (John 6:54-58). We are to feed on the bread which he gave us and feed on him as the human Messiah, flesh and blood, and of course on his sacrificial death commemorated in the Lord’s supper, which the New Testament church celebrated as part of a frequent community meal. Thus we become like Jesus as our minds are trained to conform to the mind and spirit of Jesus.

Unfortunately, in church we have often been taught things which do not reflect the mind, heart and spirit (heart is very close in meaning to spirit and mind) of Jesus. We have been taught to speak of “going to heaven” and of dead relatives being “in heaven.” Or even of Mary and saints being now “in heaven.” Jesus thought no such thing. He never said anything like that. Jesus always invited people not to “go to heaven,” but to “inherit the [future] Kingdom of God” when Jesus comes back. We are invited to **inherit the earth** (Matt. 5:5). Why contradict Jesus by speaking of “going to heaven”?

Paul exhorted us to undergo a program and process of being “transformed by the **renewing of the mind**,” so that we might know the will, and mind and spirit of God and of Jesus (Rom. 12:2). Isaiah complained that people had been blinded by false ideas — so blinded that they could not understand Scripture. The penalty for not conforming our minds and spirits to the mind and spirit of God was that “the LORD has poured over you a spirit of deep sleep. He has shut your eyes, the prophets; he has covered your heads, the seers” (Isa. 29:10). The awful result of this spiritual blindness was that “the vision will be to you like the words of a sealed book, which when they give it to the one who is literate [theologically educated] saying ‘Please read this,’ he will say, ‘I cannot, because 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’” (vv. 11, 12).

Then the Bible tells us how that disastrous situation has come about. “Because this people draw near with their words [they have not given up on religion!] and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their heart [understanding, mind, spirit] far from Me, and their reverence [their theological systems and ways of worship] consists of tradition learned by rote” (v. 13).

The mind of the people has not been instructed and informed by the words, spirit, mind, heart of God and of Jesus. They have learned what they think they know of the Bible from tradition and denominational systems. They have developed certain bad habits which deceive them into thinking that they have understood the Bible when they have not. An example: they will read in Ecclesiastes 12:7 of the spirit returning to God who gave it. Their church has told them that this means that a person goes consciously to heaven at death as a disembodied spirit. What their church has *not* taught them is found earlier in Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10, that in death there is no consciousness or activity at all! The dead know nothing at all. But that is not what Church told them. So they just read their rote-learned traditions into Scripture and twist it. The power of “the group” to indoctrinate is very great.

The results of indoctrination live on, even sometimes for generations. What we learn as children or in our first serious encounter with Bible teachers is almost indelibly written into our consciousness. It is often the only frame of reference we have. We cling to it despite the most telling arguments against it!

It is therefore important to ally ourselves with the biblical writers and learn from *them*. The Way International managed to convince its members that water baptism is an unnecessary legalism and should not be practiced. For those not trained in that theological stable, such a concept is amazingly alien to what they read in the Bible. After all, right in the Great Commission, Jesus commanded the disciples to baptize people until the end of the age, and Peter commanded the Gentiles, in the name of Jesus — on his authority — to be baptized *in water* (Acts 10:47, 48).

In one denomination the teaching was instilled that there is no external Devil, nor demons. For the ordinary reader not brought up within the narrow confines of that denomination, such an idea is simply incredible. What one person sees clearly — that Jesus spoke to the Devil, that the Devil came up to him and spoke to him and that Jesus spoke to demons and they to him — has been rendered unintelligible by one denomination. It takes sometimes generations to correct this fundamental blunder, which amounts in fact to an assault on the truthfulness of the New Testament. To deny the existence of supernatural evil is to eliminate a whole dimension from Scripture.

It all depends on how our minds, hearts and spirits are formed. It all depends on what words are allowed to enter our minds, whether true or false. Words are the expression of spirit and mind. Spirit is the sum total of what our minds have become through exposure to ideas, true and false. Christianity is a process of purifying our minds under the influence of the holy spirit and mind and intelligence of God and Jesus. The holy spirit brings us holy intelligence, temperament and disposition, and thus the fruits of the spirit.

The fruit of the spirit is born of a particular seed. Jesus explained this brilliantly in the parable of the sower which gives us Jesus' theology of conversion and salvation. All depends on our reception or non-reception of the Gospel, or word of the Kingdom (Matt. 13:19). We either hear and understand this Gospel of the Kingdom or we do not. The Devil knows that the issue of the Kingdom is the fulcrum on which success or failure hinges. As Jesus pointed out, in a staggeringly revealing intelligence report: "Whenever someone hears the word of God [word/Gospel of the Kingdom, Matt. 13:19] the Devil is there to snatch away what has been sown [as seed] in his heart, so that he cannot believe it *and be saved*" (Luke 8:12).

Wow! Read that again. Ponder it. Teach it to your children. Show your friends, who in probability have been misled into thinking that a Christian is one who just believes that Jesus died and rose. Certainly the death and resurrection of Jesus are indispensable elements of the Christian faith, but prior to those events, Jesus explained that the mind/word/spirit of God and of Jesus must be assimilated by our believing the Gospel of the Kingdom, the seed of immortality (Luke 8:11; 2 Tim. 1:10).

Words, the words of Jesus, are conveyors of spirit. They transform our minds, thinking and spirit into the likeness of the spirit, mind and thinking of Jesus. Words are the index of the mind. This truth is found throughout the Bible. Listen to this fundamentally important statement of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1:23, 24. Wisdom, that is, God speaking His Wisdom to us, says: "Turn at my reproof [i.e., repent]. Look, I will pour out my **spirit** on you. I will make my **words** known to you. Because I called but you refused..." Here lies the danger of our refusal to believe the words of God in Scripture. Notice how "pouring out my **spirit**" is equivalent to "making my **words** known to you." Jesus said it superbly: "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63). Jesus as the embodiment of God's wisdom poured out spirit on us through his words and, like Wisdom in Proverbs, made known the secrets of the Kingdom of God (Matt. 13:11). Those secrets or mysteries which are given to us are nothing less than the knowledge of the unfolding immortality program of God, to prepare us now for positions of leadership in the

coming Kingdom (Matt. 19:28, 29; Rev. 2:26; 3:21; 5:9, 10; 20:1-6; 1 Cor. 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:12) and to give us immortality in the future resurrection (1 Cor. 15:23).

How valuable is that information? Jesus counseled us to treat the Kingdom Gospel as more precious than the most precious pearl. He advised us to give up everything to acquire that understanding, to suffer for that Kingdom knowledge and to spread it as light everywhere we can, in a dark and ignorant world.

How important is understanding? R.T. France comments well on how Jesus, according to Matthew, viewed the answer to this question. "Matthew's vision of the church is of a uniquely privileged body of people to whom the divine mysteries have been revealed...They have launched on a course of training in understanding the mysteries, both intellectually and practically...What distinguishes the bad from the good is expressed in a variety of ways...All four types of soil [in the parable of the sower] 'hear the word' [about the Kingdom]. Matthew twice includes the motif of 'understanding.' It is the lack of understanding which marks out the first and most hopeless category of hearers (13:19), while the fruitful soil represents those 'who hear and *understand*'...A professed allegiance to Jesus and even successful charismatic activity in a Christian context are no guarantee of proving ultimately to be among the saved."<sup>2</sup> France refers here to the solemn warning of Jesus that many will claim to have done miracles in his name and yet be rejected in the judgment (Matt. 7:21-23).

How could this awful situation arise? Simply because spirit is properly measured by understanding and not by physical "happenings." It is all too easy to be drawn into a false spirituality by leaving out the basis of true faith which is a mind/spirit renewed under the influence of the Gospel of the Kingdom. One may exhibit all sorts of "spiritual" behavior and even insist on it as a mark of true spirituality. Those, for example, who make "speaking in tongues" the indispensable condition of spirituality have missed the point of Jesus' teaching. What counts, fundamentally, is fruit of the spirit and fruit is born of the word/seed/gospel of the Kingdom. It is understanding of who Jesus is and of his saving Gospel of the Kingdom which lays the basis for true spirituality. And there are no substitutes.

Dr. John Meagher reported Jesus' teaching so well. He described Mark's account of Jesus' teaching in the parable of the sower. "**Jesus implies that those who do not understand the mystery of the Kingdom will not have their sins forgiven**" (Mark 4:11, 12). "The indispensably prerequisite *understanding* is...the fulcrum on which the difference is made between salvation and damnation. Matthew's parallel account likewise draws a

<sup>2</sup> *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, pp. 273-276.

line between those who have, to whom are given the secrets of the Kingdom, and those from whom this privilege is withheld, who do not have [the ‘haves and the have-nots’!], and from whom all will be taken away (Matt. 13:11-12; cp. 25:29-30). If the latter, those who do not understand, should understand, they would repent and be healed (13:13-15), but since they do not they are lost...Matthew attests to the ominous consequences of failing to confess a faith in Jesus: whoever acknowledges him before men will be acknowledged by him before the Father (10:32)...

“Matthew presumes a grasp of the Word [of the Kingdom] as prerequisite to salvation. In this version of the parable of the sower...the key disqualification of those imaged in the seed by the roadside is that they hear the word of the Kingdom *but do not understand*, and therefore the word is easily rendered ineffective. **The key difference in the seed on the good ground is that the word is not only heard but understood: this is what makes it possible to bear the fruit by which salvation comes (13:19, 23). By their fruits you will know them, and by their fruits they will be judged; but for Matthew, no less than for Mark and Luke, the fruits in question are those that grow from the seed of the word [about the Kingdom] rightly understood.**”<sup>3</sup>

It is common to hear people say “Don’t teach me ‘doctrine’ but teach me ‘Christian living.’” Such a view shows a sad misunderstanding of Jesus. He insists that the Christian life, Christian living, *begins* with a true grasp of who he is as Messiah and of his seed/gospel/word of the Kingdom. Fruit can only be born of that seed/word and no other. There is no difference at all between being “born of the spirit” (John 3:3, 6, 8) and being “born of the word.” Seeing the Kingdom, that is understanding the Gospel of the Kingdom, is the basis of being born of the spirit. Paul also referred to birth from the spirit as birth based on the promise (Gal. 4:28, 29). Paul taught that Christians **receive the spirit** by hearing and believing the Gospel (Gal. 3:2). Jesus had said the same thing in the parable of the sower.

Peter, to whom the keys of access to the Kingdom had been given by Jesus (Matt. 16:18, 19), defined the salvation/conversion process beautifully, following his master. “You have in obedience to **the truth** purified yourselves for a sincere love of the brethren...You have **been born** again not of corruptible seed, but from imperishable seed, that is, the **living word** of God...which is the Gospel **word** preached to you” (see 1 Pet. 1:22-25). This is rebirth from the **word** and is the same process as rebirth from the **spirit**.

Job long ago understood that words are expressive of spirit and mind. We need the mind/spirit/word of God.

We need this in our inner selves. And this comes by study and meditation. It comes from desiring such spiritual food, hungering for it as the life-sustaining energy which alone can lead to immortality in the coming kingdom (1 Cor. 15:23; Luke 14:14).

Listen to Job’s wonderful equation of parallel ideas: “What a help you are to the weak! [he says mockingly to his accusers] How have you **saved** the arm without strength! What **counsel** you have given to one without **wisdom**! What helpful **insight** you have abundantly provided! To whom have you uttered **words**? Whose **SPIRIT** was expressed through you?” (Job 26:2-4).

**Words are the expression of spirit.** Spirit is formed in us by the accumulation of understanding based on truth, true words. Spirit is measured by its conformity to the spirit-inspired words of God and Jesus in the Bible. “Test the spirits,” says John (1 John 4:1), as the false spirits swirled around the church towards the end of the first century. How do you do this? By measuring the “worship styles,” “dancing in the aisles,” or ecstatic utterance? No. By finding out what is in *the mind* of the person in question. How does he understand? Who does he say Jesus is? That is the yardstick for testing spirituality. If he still speaks of “going to heaven,” what spirit is driving his mind? Is his mind transformed so that he sounds like Jesus who spoke of inheriting the Kingdom, never of believers “going to heaven”?

Christianity is measured by its conformity to the mind/spirit/teaching/heart of Jesus and his Apostles. What blocks the entrance (Ps. 119:130) of the life-giving words of Jesus is our own stubbornly maintained misunderstandings of the Bible. With these we not only divide the body of Christ and impede unity, but put a stranglehold on our own throats. In this situation we need a spiritual “adjustment” — to use the analogy from the world of chiropractic. Such adjustments are very hard to achieve in some church settings, because various factions maintain their out-of-adjustment positions and defend their territory relentlessly. ✧

## Colossians 1:16

### A Misleading Text in Standard Versions

**C**olossians 1:16 in the King James (Authorized) version of the Bible is likely to be misleading. It reads: “By him [Jesus] were all things created that are on the earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created by him and for him.” Although the creation in question is that of the hierarchy of the universe, the average reader is likely to receive the impression that Jesus was the creator in Genesis 1:1. “All things were made by him.”

To say that Paul thinks of Jesus as the creator active in Genesis 1:1 contradicts a number of other biblical

<sup>3</sup> *Way of the Word*, pp. 69, 70, my emphasis.

passages. Firstly in Hebrews 4:4, where God and Jesus are quite distinct personalities, the writer says that “God [not Jesus] rested on the seventh day from all His works.” This text makes the Father the active agent in creation. The same book says in its opening verses that God spoke by a Son only in “the end of these [earlier] days.” God did not speak through a Son until the ministry of Jesus in Israel.

The Son is associated not with Old Testament times but with the historical ministry of Jesus. Jesus himself referred to someone other than himself “who made them male and female.” He stated in Mark 10:6 that “from the beginning of the creation *God* made them male and female.” This view is exactly in line with the Old Testament assertion that the One God of Israel, Yahweh, the Father, created everything and was *alone* in the act of creation of Genesis 1:1: “Yahweh who made all things, who stretched forth the heavens all alone, who spread forth the earth by Myself. Who was with Me?” (Isa. 44:24). The implied answer is that no one assisted the Father at the creation of the universe. In Isaiah the promised Messiah is a personality distinct from the God who claims to have been unaided and unaccompanied at creation. The Messiah is the Son who is born to Israel (Isa. 9:6). In Malachi 2:10 the One God of the Hebrew Bible is defined as the Father and it was He who created all things alone. Paul knew these texts and would not have contradicted them by asserting that the Son had actually created the universe. Paul was a staunch believer in Israel’s creed: “There is no God but one... There is one God, the Father.” Jesus is the human Lord Messiah (Ps. 110:1, *adoni*), according to Peter in Acts 2:34-36 and the angel in Luke 2:11.

Literally translated, Colossians 1:16 does not say that all things were created *by* Jesus. *The Expositors Commentary* on the Greek text of Colossians says flatly of Colossians 1:16: “This does not mean ‘by him.’” The margins of many Bibles will show that the text actually reads: “**In** [*en*] him all things were created...All things have been created **through** [*dia+gen.*] him and **with a view to** [*eis*] him.” Paul’s chief purpose in this passage is to speak of Christ’s work in redemption and his position in the hierarchy of authority, i.e. the Kingdom in which Christians have been promised a share and which they await as an inheritance (Col. 1:13; 3:24). Jesus has a supreme position over all created beings and rival powers. Paul describes the position of Jesus as “firstborn” (*prototokos*) and first principle or chief (*arche*) of the creation (v. 15). Jesus is to head up the Kingdom, the “Kingdom of God’s dear Son” (v. 13). The issue here is authority and rule. “Firstborn” is a Messianic title drawn from Psalm 89, in which the Father speaks of the coming Messiah: “He will cry to me, ‘Thou art my Father, my God and the rock of my salvation.’ I

will make him my firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth...I will establish his seed forever and his throne as the days of heaven” (Ps. 89:26-29).

Because Jesus is God’s eldest Son, he is the reason for the creation. All things were created “in” him. The exact force of these prepositions is difficult to specify, but one distinguished authority suggests that it should be taken here in a causal sense: “For because of him the universe was created.”<sup>4</sup> ✧

## Comments

“I was a Jehovah’s Witness for 20 years. I dissociated myself 4 years ago because their policy change on blood made me realise that they were not ‘God’s agents on the earth.’ After leaving I read Ray Franz’s books on Christian Freedom. I was shunned by all except one family who subsequently left themselves. We have studied the Bible together since and have been searching and praying for fellowship with others who did not believe the Trinity doctrine. I have been listening to everything I can from your website.” — *England*

“I live in the Netherlands and was born a Roman Catholic, but I now have no place to meet others in church. I have read about the Abrahamic faith and I also believe that the Kingdom of God will be established on the earth.” — *The Netherlands*

“I want to thank you for all of the fine podcasts that you have done (**thebyteshow.com**). This is where I first came across you and your Biblical perspectives, and your logic and insight into the Scriptures are both eye-opening and refreshing. I was raised Byzantine Catholic, fell away and explored various other Christian religious groups. I do not belong to any organized religion, but fervently believe in Adonai Elohim, His only begotten Son, Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit (God’s will in action). I have gained a new appreciation for what God wants us to do while here on earth: Tell about the Good News of His coming Kingdom!!” — *Ohio*

“I would like to thank you for sending me your magazine. I am so grateful. I am enjoying the reading and learning. I really enjoyed your book on the Trinity and it makes sense to me. I am more at peace in my mind about Christianity. I am so grateful to start finding the truth about Jesus. Thank you for writing this book on the Trinity.” — *Australia*

“I am still hanging in there constantly focusing on the Kingdom and can hardly wait each month for the magazine to arrive. The explanation of Islam was really eye-opening in the February issue.” — *Australia*

*Please see back page for updated list of 2007 Theological Conference DVDs.*

<sup>4</sup> Moulton, Milligan, *Grammar of the New Testament*, 3, p. 253.