

Jesus and the Eclipse of His Gospel About the Kingdom of God*

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The Christian documents demonstrate, beyond any argument, that Jesus preached the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. Not only this, he did not initially say anything about his own death and resurrection (Luke 18:31-34). This must prove conclusively that the Message about the Kingdom contains information other than about the death and resurrection of the Savior.

This point is so crucial to our whole argument that we must emphasize it further. Jesus proclaimed the Gospel of the Kingdom in the company of the twelve apostles: “Now after this he made his way through towns and villages preaching and proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God. With him went the twelve” (Luke 8:1). Later, “he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal” (Luke 9:1-2).

At this stage the disciples had no knowledge of the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is proved by their subsequent reaction to Jesus’ announcement of his impending arrest and crucifixion:

Then taking the twelve aside he said to them, “Now we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything which is written by the prophets about the Son of Man is to come true. For he will be handed over to the pagans and will be mocked, maltreated and spat on, and when

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they have scourged him, they will put him to death; and on the third day he will rise again.” But they could make nothing of this; what he had said was quite obscure to them, they had no idea what it meant (Luke 18:31-34).

Now if, as is often said, the Gospel consists of information about the death and resurrection of Jesus only, how is it that both Jesus and the twelve proclaimed the Gospel without reference to the Savior’s death and resurrection? The answer is clear. The Gospel of the Kingdom was announced before Jesus died and, as the book of Acts informs us, after the resurrection.¹ In Acts, however, we find added to the Gospel about the Kingdom the new facts about the death and resurrection of Jesus, which had now become history. The result is a Gospel Message about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 8:12). The Kingdom Message remains the primary component of the Gospel; Jesus’ death and resurrection are additional, indispensable subjects for belief. Christianity, then, urges belief not only in the work of Jesus, but in his saving words.

In this connection the words of F.C. Grant deserve a wide hearing: “The theological basis of the Reformation was Paulinism, chiefly as understood by Luther and Calvin, not the teaching of the Gospels, which were demonstrably Jewish in tone and outlook as well as in language and presuppositions.”² He complains that “theologians begin with Paul and the ‘gospel’ means for them the seventh chapter of Romans.”³ The result is that what we call the Gospel “is not the teaching of Jesus, but the interpretation of Jesus, chiefly his death and resurrection, as set forth by Paul . . . The consequences of this misinterpretation are far-reaching, not only for Jews but for Christians.”⁴ There was a “shift in the whole center of gravity in the gospel; it placed in the forefront of consideration, as the real subject of the gospel, the person of Jesus rather than the Kingdom of God . . . and the hope of the Kingdom receded and became eventually only another name for ‘heaven,’ the state of bliss beyond death.”⁵ There could be no more astute analysis of the defection of the church from the Gospel of Jesus.

¹ Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31 and implied by the synonym “Word.”

² F.C. Grant, *Ancient Judaism and the New Testament*, New York: Macmillan, 1959, 15.

³ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵ F.C. Grant, *The Earliest Gospel*, Abingdon Press, 1943, 256, 258.

The Loss of the Messianic Element in the Gospel

The attempts of commentators to avoid the New Testament's Messianic material are a monument to theology's effort to construct its own "demessianized" versions of Christianity. The crux of the problem is that man does not want God to impose His rule on the earth. Much less does he like to think of Jesus shattering the nations and ruling them with a rod of iron. The original Messianic version of Christianity, preached and taught by Jesus and the apostles, has therefore been dismantled. Its Messianic framework has been removed. What remains as "Christianity" has tenuous links with the faith of the New Testament. The name of Jesus has been attached to a system of religion markedly different from his own belief system. A classic example of the avoidance of Jesus and his Message is Thomas Aquinas who "does not devote any significant portion of his principal theological enterprise to the Kingdom of God, the central theme of the preaching of Jesus."⁶

The New Testament has as its supreme goal the establishment, by divine intervention, of world peace under the government of the coming Messiah. The "revised" version of the faith promises a salvation for the individual in a realm far removed from the earth. Jesus, however, offered his followers positions of responsibility in a future new world order — the Kingdom of God. Belief in that new world order was, and is, the first step in intelligent faith in the Gospel: "The Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Good News" (Mark 1:14, 15). To grasp the concept of the Kingdom is to become involved with the divine Plan for the rescue of the human race, a project which spans the whole Bible.

The loss of Christianity's central point may be likened to a team hoping to go to the moon. They decide that they need a launching pad and a spaceship in order to realize their dream. After they have acquired the necessary equipment for the journey, they forget what it was they needed the equipment for. Their interest in the pad and the spacecraft remains, but the trip to the moon is forgotten.

In New Testament Christianity the prospect of a place in the future Kingdom of God provides the stimulus to the whole Christian venture. The death and resurrection of Jesus make possible the believer's hope for a share in that Kingdom. Grasping the nature of that hope is the first step to be taken by the disciple. Belief in Jesus provides the way to the goal and guarantees its ultimate realization.

⁶ B.T. Viviano, *The Kingdom of God in History*, Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988, 61.

In contemporary presentations of the “Gospel” people are being asked to “believe in Jesus,” in the absence of a clear idea of what Jesus stands for. They are not exposed to Jesus’ Message about the Kingdom, which he preached long before he spoke of his death and resurrection. The situation is comparable to a political campaign in which a candidate appeals for support before the voters know what his manifesto is. It is difficult to express intelligent faith in Jesus unless one understands what Jesus meant by his “News about the Kingdom” — the Gospel as Jesus proclaimed it.

Discussion about the Kingdom of God has been tortuous. Scholarly writing is characterized by the desire to get rid of the future Kingdom in the interests of a modern world view. Happily many of the greatest commentators correctly describe what they find in the text of Scripture, but they do not challenge the church to adopt the scriptural scheme. While evangelists constantly substitute “heaven” for the Christian goal of inheriting the earth/Kingdom, standard commentaries often support a historically accurate understanding of the words of Jesus: The meaning of the Kingdom of Heaven is provided by Jesus when He promises the meek an inheritance of the earth. Jesus confirms the prophetic hope of the Psalms.

At the root of the inconsistency of churches is the loss of the Hebrew background to the teaching of Jesus and the apostles and the substitution of a non-Messianic philosophical mold into which the ethical teachings of the New Testament have been poured. The result is a hybrid religion, an amalgam of the Greek spirit with the Hebrew prophetic vision. Churchgoers are not told about the mixture of two incompatible worlds of thought. When they are instructed to read the Bible they unconsciously read the mixed version of the faith back into the Christian documents, isolating and bending various verses to fit their preconceived idea. At the same time the Protestant Church claims that it “goes by the Bible.” Some Protestants spend inordinate amounts of time defending the “inerrancy” of the text while continuing to extract from Scripture an unmessianic system of beliefs.

The principal casualty in this loss of Jesus’ Messianic teaching is the doctrine of the Kingdom of God, which commentators say either cannot be defined, or was wrongly attributed to Jesus by the early church, or is no longer relevant to the modern world. A variety of techniques enable scholars to circumvent the plain meaning of the Kingdom, often because

they believe that since it has not arrived in a Messianic sense it never will. This attitude represents the failure of faith in the ongoing Plan for rescue.

Throughout Christian history writers of the first eminence have complained about the problematic state of the church's theology. A warning note was sounded by Jacques Ellul when he isolated the root problem of the church's troubles:

A familiar example of the mutation to which revelation was subjected is its contamination by the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul. I will briefly recall it. In Jewish thought death is total. There is no immortal soul, no division of body and soul. Paul's thinking is Jewish in this regard. The soul belongs to the "psychical" realm and is part of the flesh. The body is the whole being. In death, there is no separation of body and soul. The soul is as mortal as the body. But there is a resurrection. Out of the nothingness that human life becomes, God creates anew the being that was dead. This is a creation by grace; there is no immortal soul intrinsic to us. Greek philosophy, however, introduces among theologians the idea of the immortal soul. The belief was widespread in popular religion and it was integrated into Christianity, but it is a total perversion . . . All Christian thinking is led astray by this initial mutation that comes through Greek philosophy and Near Eastern cults . . . Belief in the soul's celestial immortality arose in the second half of the fifth century B.C. on the basis of astronomy. Pythagorean astronomy radically transformed the idea of the destiny of the soul held by Mediterranean peoples . . . It substitutes the notion of a soul of celestial substance exiled in this world. This idea completely contaminates biblical thinking, gradually replaces the affirmation of the resurrection, and transforms the kingdom of the dead into the kingdom of God.⁷

Such insight illuminates the damage which apostolic faith has sustained. There is obviously an urgent need for repair. Our system of biblical interpretation has been diverted into channels alien to the biblical founding fathers, though compatible with the post-biblical Greek "Church Fathers." A catena of complementary statements⁸ from various biblical experts point in that direction:

⁷ Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, Eerdmans, 1986, 25.

⁸ Emphasis mine in each case.

For most of Christian history Paul has been misunderstood:

The first task of exegesis is to penetrate as far as possible inside the historical context(s) of the author and of those for whom he wrote. So much of this involves the taken-for-granted(s) of both author and addressees. Where a modern reader is unaware of (or unsympathetic to) these shared assumptions and concerns it will be impossible to hear the text as the author intended it to be heard (and assumed it would be heard). In this case, a major part of that context is the self-understanding of Jews and Judaism in the first century and of Gentiles sympathetic to Judaism. *Since most of Christian history and scholarship, regrettably, has been unsympathetic to that self-understanding, if not downright hostile to it, a proper appreciation of Paul in his interaction with that self-understanding has been virtually impossible.*⁹

Modern English Christians misunderstand the Bible:

The modern English Christian gives a meaning to the words of the New Testament different from that which was in the minds of the Jewish writers. Greek was the language they used to convey the universal Christian message, but their mode of thinking was to a large extent Hebraic. For a full understanding it is necessary for the modern Christian not only to study the Greek text, but to sense the Hebraic idea which the Jewish writers sought to convey in Greek words. I cannot claim to have become very skilled in this, but made enough progress to discover how greatly I had misinterpreted the Bible in the past. Like all ordained Christian ministers I had spoken dogmatically, authoritatively from a pulpit which no one may occupy without licence from a Bishop; and much of what I had said had been misleading.¹⁰

In regard to scriptural teaching about the destiny of man, original biblical concepts have been substituted with ideas from Hellenism and Gnosticism:

The hope of the early church centered on the resurrection of the Last Day. It is this which first calls the dead into eternal life (1 Cor.

⁹ James Dunn, *Commentary on Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, Dallas: Word Books, 1988, xiv, xv.

¹⁰ David Watson, *Christian Myth and Spiritual Reality*, Victor Gallanz, 1967, 28, 29.

15; Phil. 3:21). This resurrection happens to the man and not only to the body. Paul speaks of the resurrection not “of the body” but “of the dead.” This understanding of the resurrection implicitly understands death as also affecting the whole man . . . *Thus* [in traditional Christian teaching] *the original biblical concepts have been replaced by ideas from Hellenistic Gnostic dualism.* The New Testament idea of the resurrection which affects the whole man has had to give way to the immortality of the soul. The Last Day also loses its significance, for souls have received all that is decisively important long before this. Eschatological tension is no longer strongly directed to the day of Jesus’ Coming. *The difference between this and the Hope of the New Testament is very great.*¹¹

Christian teaching was transformed. Messianic hopes were forgotten. The notion of the Kingdom of God on earth disappeared. Immortality at death took the place of the resurrection into the Kingdom on earth:

Like all concepts the meaning of religious terms is changed with a changing experience and a changing world view. Transplanted into the Greek world view, inevitably *the Christian teaching was modified — indeed transformed.* Questions which had never been asked came into the foreground and the Jewish pre-suppositions tended to disappear. Especially were *the Messianic hopes forgotten or transferred to a transcendent sphere beyond death.* When the empire became Christian in the fourth century, *the notion of a Kingdom of Christ on earth* to be introduced by a great struggle all but disappeared, remaining only as the faith of obscure groups. Immortality — the philosophical conception — took the place of the resurrection of the body. Nevertheless, the latter continues because of its presence in the primary sources, but it is no longer a determining factor, since its presupposition — *the Messianic Kingdom on earth — has been obscured.* As thus the background is changed from Jewish to Greek, so are the fundamental religious conceptions . . . We have thus a peculiar combination — *the religious doctrines of the Bible run through the forms of an alien philosophy.*¹²

¹¹ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966, 413, 414.

¹² G.W. Knox, D.D., LL.D, professor of philosophy and the history of religion, Union Theological Seminary, New York. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., vol. 6, 284.

Our creeds teach us to think in Gentile terms contrary to the New Testament:

The primary kinship of the New Testament is not with the Gentile environment, but rather with the Jewish heritage and environment . . . *We are often led by our traditional creeds and theology to think in terms of Gentile and especially Greek concepts.* We know that *not later than the second century* there began the systematic effort of the Apologists to show that the Christian faith perfected the best in Greek philosophy . . . A careful study of the New Testament must block any trend to regard the New Testament as a group of documents expressive of the Gentile mind. This book's kinship is primarily and overwhelmingly with Judaism and the Old Testament . . . *The New Testament speaks always of disapproval and usually with blunt denunciation of Gentile cults and philosophies.* It agrees essentially with the Jewish indictment of the pagan world . . . The modern church often misunderstands its relation to the Old Testament and Israel, and often inclines to prefer the Greek attitude to the New Testament view.¹³

The New Testament remains basically Jewish, not Greek — though Greek in language . . . and it can be understood only from the historical vantage point of the modified Judaism which provided the early church with its terminology and its whole frame of thought.¹⁴

Original Christianity was submerged under Graeco-Roman culture resulting in a perversion of the original faith:

Although the acute form of the secularization of Christianity in gnosticism was rejected, yet *the church . . . continued to lose more and more its primitive character and to be conformed to its environment in the Graeco-Roman culture.* The process was advanced by the Apologists, seemed to suffer a check in the influence of Irenaeus, but was stimulated in the Alexandrian school of theology . . . This development brought about the definite transformation of the rule of faith into the compendium of a Greek philosophical system . . . *We cannot assume that the faith as delivered to the saints was adequately and finally expressed in*

¹³ F.V. Filson, *The New Testament Against Its Environment*, London: SCM Press, 1950, 26, 27, 43.

¹⁴ F.C. Grant, *Ancient Judaism and the New Testament*, 133.

these Graeco-Roman intellectual forms . . . That the faith was expressed in ecclesiastical dogma always without obscuration or distortion cannot be maintained . . . That the Christian organism could not escape being affected by, in adapting itself to, its Graeco-Roman environment must be conceded; that this action and reaction were not only necessary but a condition of progress may be conjectured . . . This does not however exclude the frank recognition of the fact that there were characteristics of the Greek speculative genius and the practical Roman ethos not altogether harmonious with the distinctive character of the Gospel, so that *there was perversion amidst the progress in the subsequent development* — the salt in seasoning did lose some of its savor. Greek metaphysic and Law *misrepresented* as well as expressed the Gospel.¹⁵

The influence of Greek philosophy upon the early Christian theology is too obvious to be questioned.¹⁶

Christians do not understand the meaning of “Messiah” nor the vision of his Kingdom:

Christians have largely lost the sense of Jesus’ Messiahship. *And they have largely lost the Messianic vision.* The Greek name “Christos” means “the anointed one” and is the literal translation of the Hebrew “Mashiach” — Messiah . . . Christians who think or speak of Christ almost forget the Semitic word and the ideas which the name translates; in fact they forget that Jesus is primarily the Messiah. The very idea of Jesus’ Messiahship has passed from their minds. Having lost the original sense of the word “Christ,” many Christians have also lost the Messianic vision, i.e., the expectation of the divine future, the orientation towards *what is coming on earth* as the denouement of the present era of history.¹⁷

“Heaven” is not what Jesus promised his followers, though Christians today constantly say it is. William Strawson, a tutor in systematic theology and the philosophy of religion, made a detailed study of *Jesus*

¹⁵ A.E. Garvie, “Christianity,” *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 1910, vol. 3, 588.

¹⁶ G.P. Fisher, *History of Christian Doctrine*, T&T Clark, 1908, 32.

¹⁷ Lev Gillet, cited by Hugh Schonfield in *The Politics of God*, Hutchinson, 1970, 50, 51.

and the Future Life and dedicated 23 pages to an examination of the word “heaven” in Matthew, Mark and Luke. He concluded:

In few, if any, instances of the use of the word “heaven” is there any parallel with modern usage. The gospel records of our Lord’s life and teaching *do not speak of going to heaven*, as a modern believer so naturally does. Rather the emphasis is on that which is “heavenly” coming down to man. . . . Our modern way of speaking of life with God as being life “in heaven” is not the way the gospels speak of the matter. *Especially is there no suggestion that Jesus is offering to his disciples the certainty of “heaven” after this life.*¹⁸

Heaven as the future abode of the believers is [a conception] conspicuous by its absence from St. Paul’s thought. The second coming is always from heaven alike in the earliest (1 Thess. 1:10) and the latest (Phil. 3:20) of Paul’s letters Possibly he so takes it for granted that believers will have their place in a Messianic earthly Kingdom that he does not think it necessary to mention it.¹⁹

Jesus was not thinking of a colorless and purely heavenly beyond, but pictured it to himself as a state of things existing upon this earth — though of course a transfigured earth — and in his own land.²⁰

A disaster occurred when, after the death of the apostles, the Jewish element in original Christianity was ousted in favor of a new Gentile religion:

The creation of the Christian religion necessarily involved a retreat from the teaching of Moses, the Prophets and Jesus, which more and more became a rout As one Protestant Christian wrote: “The great people of God’s choice [the Jews] were soon the least adequately represented in the Catholic Church. That was a disaster to the church itself. It meant that the church as a whole failed to understand the Old Testament and that *the Greek mind and the Roman mind in turn, instead of the Hebrew mind, came to dominate its outlook: from that disaster the church has never recovered either in doctrine or in practice* If today another great age of evangelization is to dawn we need the Jews again Christianity is a synthesis of Judaism and paganism. As such, it is a corruption

¹⁸ London: Epworth Press, 1959, 38.

¹⁹ “Heaven,” *Dictionary of Christ and the Apostles*, vol. I, 531.

²⁰ W. Bousset, *Jesus*, London: Williams and Norgate, 1906, 82.

of as much significance as the ancient Israelite defection in blending their religion with the cults of the Canaanites. Therefore, it is not for the Jews to embrace orthodox Christianity, but for the Christians, if they are to be Israelites indeed as the People of God, to review and purify their beliefs, and to recapture what basically they have in common with the Jews, the Messianic vision.²¹

On what basis should we deny that Jesus shared Jewish beliefs?

Many of us like to think that Jesus denied Jewish beliefs about supernatural revelation and exclusive privilege, because our minds are so profoundly influenced by the philosophical way of looking at things. But have we any right to assume that he knew the falsity of the Jewish belief? Was it false? Have we a right to assume that, because a non-Jewish universalism based on philosophical modes of thought appeals to us of the twentieth century, it must therefore be the absolute truth and the divine will? Surely we must seek for some evidence. But there is no evidence in the Gospels . . . , and his disciples believed as firmly in the exclusive value of the Jewish religion after his resurrection as before.²²

The entire Christian system, both Catholic and Protestant, is flawed by the mixing of the Bible with alien Greek ideas:

Our position is that the reinterpretation of biblical theology in terms of the Greek philosophers has been both widespread throughout the centuries and everywhere destructive to the essence of the Christian faith . . . There have always been Jews who sought to make terms with the Gentile world, and it has in time meant the death of Judaism for all such. There have been Christians from the beginning who have sought to do this . . . *Neither Catholic nor Protestant theology is based on biblical theology. In each case we have a domination of Christian theology by Greek thought.*²³

²¹ H.J. Schonfield, *The Politics of God*, 98, 99, citing Canon Goudge, *Essays on Judaism and Christianity*.

²² H.F. Hamilton, *The People of God*, Oxford University Press, 1912, vol. I, 260.

²³ N.H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, London: Epworth Press, 1955, 187, 188.

The church as it developed after Bible times was poisoned by elements of Gnosticism:

Who can maintain that the church ever overcame the Gnostic doctrine of the two natures or the Valentinian Docetism? Even the later councils of the church which discussed the Christological problems in complicated, nowadays hardly intelligible definitions, did not manage to do this; *the unity of the Church foundered precisely on this.*²⁴

While Protestants claim that the Bible is their authority, they have in fact accepted a Greek-influenced version of Christianity which abandons the Bible:

The difference is obvious between the mental patterns of the New Testament and most of our accustomed Christian thinking . . . The explanation of this contrast lies in the fact that *historic Christian thought in this regard, as in others, has been Greek rather than Hebrew.* Claiming to be founded on the Scripture, it has, as a matter of fact, *completely surrendered many scriptural frameworks of thinking* and has accepted the Greek counterparts instead.²⁵

The church says one thing and does another:

The church has not usually in practice (whatever it may have claimed to be doing in theory) based its Christology exclusively on the witness of the New Testament.²⁶

From the second century a new form of Christianity was beginning to replace the faith of the Bible:

Developed Gentile Christianity of the sort which was beginning to take shape towards the end of the first century has very little to do with Jesus or the faith of the first generation. *It is a new religion developed to replace the original faith.*²⁷

²⁴ Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, Harper and Row, 1983, 372.

²⁵ H.E. Fosdick, *A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, Harper Bros., 1938, 93.

²⁶ Maurice Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, London: SCM Press, 1974, 54, 55.

²⁷ Don Cupitt, *The Debate About Christ*, London: SCM Press, 1979, 69.

The essentially political term Kingdom of God, Jesus' central theme, has been distorted in both the church and academic circles:

For the Kingdom of God to have resulted in the crucifixion of Jesus, it must have carried political connotations that the governing authorities in Jerusalem considered dangerous. Astounding as it may seem, however, neither in the church nor in academic circles has the Kingdom of God been assigned the political significance its derivation and consequences demand. *Scholarly debate has largely ignored any overt political dimensions of the kingdom.*²⁸

Symptoms of the malaise of Christian theology are seen clearly when some contemporary evangelists declare with confidence that the teachings of Jesus are not really the essential heart of the faith:

Many people today think that the essence of Christianity is Jesus' teachings, but that is not so. If you read the apostle Paul's letters, which make up most of the New Testament, you will see that there is almost nothing said about the teachings of Jesus. Throughout the rest of the New Testament, there's little reference to the teachings of Jesus, and in the Apostles' Creed, the most universally-held Christian creed, there's no reference to Jesus' teachings. There is also no reference to the example of Jesus. Only two days in the life of Jesus are mentioned — the day of his birth and the day of his death. Christianity centers not in the teachings of Jesus, but in the Person of Jesus as Incarnate God who came into the world to take upon himself our guilt and die in our place.²⁹

Such statements appear to us to be a calamitous misreading of the New Testament. Luke provides as much of the New Testament as Paul (more if Hebrews is taken to be non-Pauline). Though the creeds unfortunately pay no attention to the teachings of Jesus, Paul preaches the same Gospel as Jesus: "The word of God for Paul is not primarily a story about Jesus Christ, but a saving summons from Jesus Christ through the mouths of his heralds."³⁰ Paul points us to an imitation of Jesus as he imitates Jesus and

²⁸ R.D. Kaylor, *Jesus the Prophet, His Vision of the Kingdom on Earth*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994, 70.

²⁹ D.J. Kennedy, "How I Know Jesus Is God," *Truths that Transform*, Nov. 1989.

³⁰ J.F. Kay, "Theological Table-Talk: Myth or Narrative?" *Theology Today* (48), 1991, 330.

warns against any departure from the words of Jesus (1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Tim. 6:3). The teaching of Jesus emphasizes repeatedly the need to believe and obey his teachings, which are made the basis of salvation (Matt. 7:24-27; Mark 8:38; John 12:44-50). John the apostle cautioned the church against anyone who “goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ,” identifying such a tendency as the spirit of Antichrist (2 John 7-9). Commentators describe the erroneous teaching which John condemned so emphatically. What those first-century champions of false teaching attempted to do was “*disunite the saving word of life from the historic Jesus, and to seek another path to fellowship with God.*”³¹ The word and words of Jesus must be maintained against any and every theory which moves them away from the center of faith. Apparently in some forms of contemporary evangelism, Paul is twisted and Jesus rejected. Hence the need for a return to the Gospel as Jesus preached it.

A widely circulated tract entitled “What Is the Gospel?” which contains no reference to the Kingdom of God, declares that Jesus “came to do three days work” and that “he came not primarily to preach the Gospel . . . , but he came rather that there might be a Gospel to preach.”³² It is difficult to reconcile these statements with Jesus’ declaration that he was commissioned for the very purpose of proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom (Luke 4:43; Mark 1:38).

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that Christianity which is not rooted and anchored in the historical Jesus may turn out to be just another faith. If people are asked to “accept Christ” without being told about the Message of the historical Christ, how can we be sure that “Christ” is not just an abstract symbol? The real question then is, in the words of Jon Sobrino, “whether this Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus or some vague, abstract Spirit that is nothing more than the sublimated embodiment of the natural ‘religious’ person’s desires and yearnings. If it is the latter, then it is not only different from, but actually contrary to the Spirit of Jesus.”³³

The history of Christianity ought to give churchgoers cause for alarm. Because of an anti-intellectual approach to faith, many choose to remain in ignorance of the great issues affecting their relationship with God. When theologians ponder the condition of the church over the centuries,

³¹ H.R. Mackintosh, *The Person of Jesus Christ*, T & T Clark, 1912, 121, emphasis added.

³² Published by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1980.

³³ *Christology at the Crossroads*, Orbis Books, 1982, 384.

they often expose an extraordinary departure from the historical Jesus. David Kaylor writes:

Christian faith has not centered on the historical Jesus. The Apostles' Creed demonstrates the truth of this statement, for it moves from "born of the Virgin Mary" to "crucified under Pontius Pilate." The Creed's omission suggests that the intervening years and activities of Jesus were of no real consequence to faith . . . Theologically and ethically, it is not enough to say that a death and resurrection have occurred. Who Jesus was whom the Romans executed and God raised from the dead matters not only for the historian but for the theologian and believer. The historical character of Jesus, and not merely a spiritual Christ, provides Christian faith with its reason for being and its power to bring about change in personal social life.³⁴

If the Jesus claimed as Savior is not anchored in the historical figure recorded in the New Testament, who knows what kind of Jesus may be embraced? It seems to me clear that Satan could well play on the weakness of the religious spirit of man by presenting a Jesus who is only superficially the Jesus of the Bible. The counterfeit could, however, be most subtle. Satanic strategy would work hard to separate Jesus from his own teachings (laid out in their clearest form in Matthew, Mark and Luke). "Jesus" might then be only a religious symbol offered as a spiritual panacea for the world's and individuals' ills. The Jewish, apocalyptic Jesus, preacher of a coming just society on earth, might then fall into disrepute and obscurity. His reappearance in preaching would probably appear strange and unwanted even to churchgoers who have been fed a diet missing the New Testament Hebrew ingredients.

The safest policy against deception would be to reinstate the Gospel about the Kingdom at the heart of all preaching. This would ensure against the tendency to make Jesus up out of our own minds.³⁵ It would

³⁴ R.D. Kaylor, *Jesus the Prophet, His Vision of the Kingdom on Earth*.

³⁵ Unitarian Universalist theology seems to have fallen into the very trap against which the Bible warns (2 John 7-9). A tract on Unitarian Universalist views of Jesus says: "It is not possible to describe the historical Jesus, yet many descriptions of him exist . . . Each of us may imagine the historical Jesus as we wish . . . The important aspect of personal reality with which we must come to terms is not the historical Jesus, but the idea of Jesus as it exists in our contemporary culture . . . I find it exhilarating to believe that the perfection we have poured into the figure of Jesus has come from the minds of human beings, from human imagination and ethical

also safeguard believers against the extravagant assertion of a leading theologian who remarked: "What can be said about the historical Jesus belongs to the realm of the 'Christ according to the flesh.' That Christ, however, does not concern us. What went on within Jesus' heart I do not know, and I do not want to know."³⁶ This tendency, less blatantly expressed, plagues a number of theological schools of thought, not least the school which relegates the teaching of Jesus to a ministry to Jews only and applies his ethical instructions to the future millennium.

Confessing Jesus as Messiah, Son of God

It is with good reason that Christology has always engaged the attention of theologians. When Jesus inquired of Peter: "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15), Peter's truthful response that he was the Messiah was greeted with the highest praise. The correct answer to the question, so Jesus said, can only be supplied by divine revelation. To recognize Jesus as the Messiah is to grasp the secret of Christianity and open the way to possession of the Kingdom (Matt. 16:19). To acknowledge Jesus as something other than the Messiah, Son of God, is to miss the point of the Christian faith. John echoes his Master when he says: "There is no falsehood so great as the denial of the Messiahship of Jesus."³⁷

It is proper then that churches seek to enshrine the great Truth about who Jesus is in creedal statements. What, however, if those statements misrepresented the apostolic records? What if Canon Goudge was right in his assertion that when "the Greek and Roman rather than the Hebrew mind came to dominate the church," there occurred "a disaster in doctrine and practice from which the church has never recovered"?³⁸ We may have to admit the possibility that "orthodoxy" has been mistaken in its definition of Jesus as "God the Son." Today powerful voices are urging us to reconsider the biblical doctrine of God. Is a Godhead of "three persons in One" conceivable within the Hebrew framework which all

aspiration . . . I'm for a better and better Jesus, born from the aspiring heart of humanity" (J.G. MacKinnon).

³⁶ R. Bultmann, "Zur Frage der Christologie," in *Glauben und Verstehen*, cited by G.R. Beasley-Murray in "The Kingdom of God and Christology in the Gospels," in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ*, ed. J.B. Green and M. Turner, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, 23.

³⁷ 1 John 2:22 as rendered by J.W.C. Wand, *The New Testament Letters, Prefaced and Paraphrased*, Oxford University Press, 1946.

³⁸ Cited by H.J. Schonfield, *The Politics of God*, 98.

recognize to be unrelentingly monotheistic? Many are beginning to see the gravity of the problem. Hans Kung speaks of the Trinitarian formulation as “the unbiblical, very abstractly constructed speculation of the School tractates,” of “the Hellenization of the primordial Christian Message by Greek philosophy,” and of “the genuine concern of many Christians and the justified frustration of Jews and Muslims in trying to find in such formulas the pure faith in One God.”³⁹ Has the church the courage to look again at the biblical doctrine of God?

Scripture does, of course, teach that Jesus is the very reflection of his Father; that in Jesus, God speaks; that Jesus declares the Father to us. But it teaches with equal clarity (and this is so often overlooked) that the Father alone is “the only true God,” “the one who alone is God” (John 17:3; 5:44). It is impossible, therefore, for Jesus to be the only true God in exactly the same sense. Jesus’ Father alone is the one God of biblical monotheism. A disaster occurred, indeed, when the post-biblical theologians began to tamper with the fundamental monotheism in which Jesus was reared and which he supported at every point.⁴⁰

In describing Jesus as God the Son, the so-called “Church Fathers” of post-biblical times imposed non-biblical, non-messianic terminology on the leading figure in the drama of salvation. They created a non-biblical problem by positing a Godhead of two (and later three), and spent centuries attempting to find a non-biblical solution. The “solution” was then forced upon the church on pain of excommunication. Dissenters to the official dogma at the time of the Reformation were dealt with by imprisonment or death.

The assertion that Jesus is God detracts from the apostolic teaching that he is the Son of God, the Messiah. If he is the Messiah, he must fit the description of Messiah given in advance by the prophets. Of an eternal being, distinct from the One God the Father, who becomes man while remaining God, the Old Testament says nothing. Of a second Moses arising by supernatural conception from a descendant of David, it speaks plainly (Deut. 18:15-18; Acts 3:22; 7:37). Of a man reflecting the divine majesty, functioning in perfect harmony with God, his Father (John 10:30), showing forth the Spirit of the One God, his Father, the Bible’s pages are filled. That promised Man was the Messiah, God’s Son,

³⁹ *Jewish Monotheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981, 40.

⁴⁰ For example in Mark 12:28ff. Jesus subscribes to the Jewish monotheism of his fellow Jews.

the lamb of God, the High Priest of the faithful and the King of the coming age.

The Jesus of history will be rediscovered when it is understood that he is God's chosen King, the hope of Israel and a light to the Gentiles. That Jesus will not submit to titles which belong to abstract Greek metaphysics. It is both unnecessary and misleading to describe Jesus in terminology unknown to himself and the apostles.

The "genesis" of Jesus is described by Matthew (Matt. 1:18). The Messiah's origin as Son of God is likewise traced by Luke to a supernatural conception (Luke 1:35). Luke knows nothing of Sonship in the eternal past. Furthermore an angel appears as divine witness to the fact that Jesus is to be a King who shall reoccupy and hold forever the throne of his ancestor David. A restored Kingdom is predicted, as everywhere in Scripture. When these divine communications about the Messiah and his Kingdom are taken seriously and believed, the return to New Testament Christianity will be under way.

A "demessianized" Christianity is both pallid and self-contradictory. In contrast, the New Testament's outlook on the future, with its irrepressible hope for the return of the Christ to rule on earth, can revive and encourage. It will put us in touch with the mind of Jesus. When this happens the churches will repossess the great unifying cause which belongs to the church. The Gospel about the Kingdom of God will be heard once more.