

# **The Coming Kingdom of the Messiah**

## **A Solution to the Riddle of the New Testament**

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# Table of Contents

Foreword.....	5
Introduction.....	9

## **Part 1: Jesus and the Messianic Future**

1. The Heart of Christianity — The Kingdom of God .....	13
2. The Kingdom Expected by the Prophets.....	18
3. Traditional Jewish and Christian Explanations .....	24
4. A Third Solution.....	27
5. The Non-Political Messiah of Traditional Christianity .....	30
6. The Future Political Kingdom in the Teaching of Jesus.....	33
7. The Departing and Returning Nobleman .....	36
8. Jesus, the Jewish-Christian Messiah.....	38
9. The Undefined Future Kingdom of Traditional Christianity ....	42
10. Theology's Elimination of the Future Kingdom .....	44

## **Part 2: Biblical Christianity's Messianic Framework and Its Disappearance from the Church**

1. Salvation Through the Messiah .....	48
2. The Present Age and the Age to Come .....	55
3. Conflict in the Cosmos.....	57
4. Contemporary Theology's Anti-Messianic Tendency.....	59
5. The Influence of Gnosticism .....	64
6. Demythologizing .....	67
7. Evangelicalism's Gospel Without the Kingdom .....	68
8. Accommodation to Mystery Religion.....	76
9. A Call for a Return to New Testament Christianity .....	79
10. Tradition — The Great Barrier to Progress.....	82
11. Prediction in the New Testament.....	86
12. Baptism .....	95
13. Jesus and the Elixir of Life.....	98
14. Conclusion.....	111

Scripture Index .....	115
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# Foreword

The questions, “Who is or was Jesus?” and “What was his agenda?” have not gone away. Publishing houses continue to flood the market with a mass of literature, popular and scholarly, addressed to these so-called problems. Many churchgoers seem content to believe that the main purpose of Jesus was to die so that we can “go to heaven” when we die, and thus avoid being tortured in a hellfire forever and ever (paradoxically by a God who is full of mercy and compassion!). Jesus in fact said not a word about going to heaven when we die. Nor did he ever speak of “eternal torture.” He promised his followers that they would eventually have the earth as their inheritance, when he returned from heaven.

Who *was* this Jesus? What was his mission? Would he be welcomed in contemporary churches, and if so in which of the hundreds of denominations?

The current surge of interest in “spiritual” things has called forth a regrettable “quick-fix” approach to God, which will result in failure and disappointment. God is not found by memorizing one Bible verse and using it as a sort of mantra for gaining what we want. The sale of 5 million books promoting a single text does not advance the cause of Christ. Finding truth takes effort, investigation and study.

This writer believes that our records of the historical Jesus are consistent and reliable. They portray a Jesus who fits beautifully and unproblematically into his first-century Jewish environment (hardly surprising!). They describe a Jesus whose birth was prophesied centuries in advance by the God who reveals His grand design for world history. By divine covenant the Lord God of the Bible guaranteed the coming of the ultimate royal personage belonging to the House of David.

The authors of the Bible were skilled teachers who wrote to be understood. Their passion to share with us what they had discovered by association with Jesus is apparent in all their writings. It is hard to believe that their efforts to communicate were so poor that they result in a fragmented church with scores of

differing denominations — not to mention a frightening inability of scholars to agree on much if anything about who Jesus was. (“Learned unbelief” may in fact be the problem and not the New Testament documents themselves.) Any confusion which exists in the current church is our fault, not that of the early Christian writers of the New Testament.

The Bible is not a 20th-century American book. It is a Jewish book. Jesus was a Jew and his theology is deeply rooted in the Jewish Bible, what we call the Old Testament. Claiming, as he did, to be *the Messiah* gives us the vital, indispensable clue to what he was all about. It is as the Messiah, descendant of David and Abraham, that the New Testament introduces him (Matt. 1:1). That brilliant, comprehensive summary statement gives us the essential clue to the meaning of Jesus and his Mission. The Christ (Messiah) is God’s appointed King. The Messiah is one whose God-given destiny is to rule the world. Messiahship is a thoroughly political concept. Not to see this is to misunderstand the New Testament from cover to cover.

Far from being an ethereal, stained glass figure out of touch with reality, Jesus was much closer in style to a political campaigner, promoting his own “theocratic” (government by God) party. His ambition was to serve the political objectives of the One God whose Son he claimed to be. With his claim to be the long-promised Messiah of Israel Jesus expressed his passion for a revolutionary world government, a reorganized peaceful and prosperous society centered in Israel, the Promised Land, God’s Land (2 Sam. 7), with marvelous benefits extending across the globe. The Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), Jesus’ Bible, is simply full of this vision of a new era of world history coming. That Kingdom of God provides the only resolution of the world’s appalling and intractable problems.

Most confusingly (especially for those attempting to read the Bible and understand it) churches have invented their own idea of who and what Jesus should be. People, and especially religious people, project onto their “Jesus” all sorts of imagined ideals. They make him a teacher of timeless truths, how to be good, and so on. Or they identify him with an existing political agenda and set about to influence society with those ideals. But Jesus made no attempt

to interfere with present political systems. As the “theocratic” candidate he single-mindedly and tirelessly announced, as a threat and promise, the *future* arrival of his own world administration, the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God was the principal topic of his saving Gospel. Jesus’ faith in that coming Kingdom was based on the “Jewish” hopes of the prophets of Israel. Indeed Jesus’ followers promoted him as “that promised prophet” based on the words of God to Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15-18, Acts 3:22, 7:37. That prophet was to be empowered by God to determine the fate of every person. It would be in our interests to pay close attention and submit to that supreme ruler-for-God. His sacrificial death for the sins of the world and subsequent resurrection from death confirms his divine appointment to rulership in the coming Kingdom.

His death and resurrection must never be detached from his Gospel preaching of the Kingdom. Forgiveness in the New Testament is not secured by believing *only* that Jesus died and rose. It is granted on the condition firstly that we respond with intelligence to his own Kingdom Gospel preaching. His first command was that we believe the Gospel about the Kingdom (Mark 1:14, 15).

This book proposes in non-technical language that the New Testament be reattached to its Old Testament background. Secondly that Jesus be understood as the Messiah of Israel and the world and studied in the light of his impassioned proclamation of a new political order on earth which he will supervise as King, ruling from Israel, at his return to the earth. His Gospel or Good News about the Kingdom — the Davidic Messianic Kingdom — not only offers you personally indestructible life, immortality, by a future resurrection from death (a very different concept from “going to heaven when we die”). The Gospel as Jesus preached it invites you also to dedicate the rest of your life to preparation for participation in the supervision of that future Kingdom on a renewed earth. You are invited to be a co-heir of the Kingdom with the Messiah. In short, the Jesus of history, the original “theocrat,” continues his work of recruiting members of his royal household, the theocratic party, who are urged to prepare themselves with divine help to take part in the Messiah’s government of the future. This will be the first and only administration to rule the world successfully.



# Introduction

Scholarship has reached an impasse in its attempt to understand the life and teaching of Jesus. Long established and deeply rooted patterns of thought prevent it from entering fully into the spirit of his mission. The difficulty lies quite simply in a lack of sympathy with the Messianic Kingdom which was the center of all that Jesus taught.

The so-called problem of Jesus' Messianic consciousness can be solved only when scholars abandon their prejudice against the Messianism which pervades the New Testament and indeed the entire Bible. The exposition of a religious document by those who do not share the beliefs set forth in the document presents enormous difficulties. Orthodox Christianity, both conservative and liberal, has very little time for things Messianic, in the sense in which Jesus and his first-century audience understood that term. Until expositors reorientate themselves to the Hebrew, Messianic environment in which Jesus taught and react in sympathy with it, they will continue to obscure the one Jesus of history and faith, both the man and his message.

The process of reading the New Testament through the filter of church tradition has been going on for so long that nothing short of a theological revolution will bring it to an end. But there are hopeful signs. The late twentieth century produced a mood likely to encourage the new look at the New Testament documents necessary for getting at the heart of them. A thirst for exploration is abroad among theologians and ordinary students of the Bible. There is evidence that the dogmas of post-biblical Christianity are beginning to relax their vice-like grip.

What needs to be undertaken urgently is a reading of the New Testament, and the whole Bible, allowing its unified message to speak to us. But we must be on guard against filtering out those elements of the message which we find distasteful or alien to our modern ways of thinking. It has so often happened that scholars decide arbitrarily which elements of the New Testament they will

accept as relevant to faith. If they do not care for apocalyptic,<sup>1</sup> the Jesus they find in the records will not have said anything dramatic about the end of the age. If it is a liberal figure they are looking for, they will find him in Jesus. If a social reformer, they will discover him in the Christian documents.

It is widely recognized that this has been a weakness of the scholarly method in the past. Nevertheless, contemporary theologians continue to demonstrate their dislike of the Messianism of Jesus when they either ignore those of his sayings which prove him to be in the best Old Testament and Jewish apocalyptic tradition, or blame all such “flights of fancy” on the New Testament church. Much ingenuity has been employed in an effort to excuse Jesus for those of his teachings which *we* find uncomfortable or unacceptable.

If, however, we read the New Testament in its Hebrew context, and allow ourselves to become involved in its message, we will find that a Christianity emerges which is both coherent and practical, though different in some important respects from the faith which has gained acceptance as the religion of Jesus and the Apostles.

It is with the central theme of all Jesus’ teachings that any investigation must begin. Fortunately scholarship is unanimous in its understanding of what that theme is. Even a cursory glance at the reports of Matthew, Mark and Luke reveal it to be unquestionably *the Kingdom of God*.

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<sup>1</sup> I.e., having to do with a future cataclysmic intervention by God, using His agent, the Messiah, to establish a new society — the Kingdom of God.

# **PART 1**

## **Jesus and the Messianic Future**



# 1

## The Heart of Christianity — The Kingdom of God

Our Christian documents point to one undeniable fact: Jesus was concerned above all with the Gospel about the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is the center of his entire mission. It is his watchword and the nucleus of all his teaching. He announced that it was “at hand,”<sup>2</sup> demonstrated its power in his ministry, promised it as a reward to his disciples,<sup>3</sup> and urged them to pray for its coming.<sup>4</sup> He also assured his followers that they would one day occupy executive positions as ministers of state in the Kingdom: “You have stayed with me through all my trials; and just as my Father has granted me a Kingdom by covenant, I covenant that Kingdom to you. You will eat and drink at my table in my Kingdom, and you will sit on thrones to administer the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:28-30; cp. Acts 1:6; 3:21).

These momentous promises were to find fulfillment “in the New Age, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne” (Matt. 19:28). The promised New Age would arrive with the Second Coming.<sup>5</sup>

Scholars are convinced that Jesus cannot truly be understood unless we grasp what he meant by the Kingdom of God. However, they are much less confident about their ability to offer a clear definition of the Kingdom. Theological writings often express uncertainty about whether we can ever recover the meaning which Jesus attached to the phrase “Kingdom of God”:

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:14, 15: “Jesus came into Galilee preaching the Gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel.’”

<sup>3</sup> Luke 12:32, “Fear not, little flock, for your Father has resolved with delight to give you the Kingdom.”

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 6:10, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth.”

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 25:31, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his throne of glory.”

It is time someone called the bluff of those who think they know exactly what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God.<sup>6</sup>

Despite various attempts, it is not possible to define “Kingdom of God” as it is used in the Gospels or outside clearer than to say it stands for the sum total of blessing bestowed by God in Christ and consisting in the highest life in which we are yet truly at home.<sup>7</sup>

Other commentators sense that something is seriously amiss when the phrase which Jesus used constantly — in fact his own *Gospel* — is seldom, if ever, heard in Christian circles. Tom Sine points out that “the victory of the future of God was the central theme of the ministry of Jesus.” Then he adds: “Michael Green asked during the Lausanne International Conference on World Evangelization in 1974, ‘How much have you heard here about the Kingdom of God? Not much. *It is not our language.* But it was Jesus’ prime concern.’”<sup>8</sup>

The frank admission of Peter Wagner ought to be disturbing. It is immensely instructive. He confesses that Christians are not using the language of Jesus! In his book, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*, he cites George Eldon Ladd as saying that “modern scholarship is quite unanimous in the opinion that the Kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus.” Wagner then comments:

If this is true, and I know of no reason to dispute it, I cannot help wondering out loud why I haven’t heard more about it in the thirty years I have been a Christian. I certainly have read about it enough in the Bible. Matthew mentions the Kingdom 52 times, Mark 19 times, Luke 44 times and John 4. But I honestly cannot remember any pastor whose ministry I have been under actually preaching a sermon on the Kingdom of God. As I rummage through my own sermon barrel, I now realize that I myself have never preached a sermon on it. Where has the Kingdom been?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Morgan, in *Theology*, November 1979, p. 458.

<sup>7</sup> *The New Century Bible, Commentary on James*, ed. E.M. Sidebottom, London: Nelson, 1967, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy*, Waco, TX: Word Books, 1981, pp. 102-3, emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> The centrality of the Kingdom of God in Jesus’ teaching is emphasized in many contemporary sources, for example in *Christian Religious Education* by

Arthur Glasser, expert on Christian missions, asked:

When is the last time you heard a sermon on the Kingdom of God? Frankly, I'd be hard put to recall ever having heard a solid exposition of this theme. How do we square this silence with the widely accepted fact that the Kingdom of God dominated our Lord's thought and ministry? My experience is not uncommon. I've checked this out with my colleagues. Of course, they readily agree they've often heard sermons on bits and pieces of Jesus' parables. But as for a solid sermon on the nature of the Kingdom of God as Jesus taught it — upon reflection, they too began to express surprise that is the rare pastor who tackles the subject.<sup>10</sup>

These scholars have put their fingers on a fundamental problem of Christianity as we know it. Contemporary evangelism and indeed preaching in general, though supposedly based on the Bible, *do not sound like the teaching of Jesus*. While they continue to use his name, they do not reflect his central theme — the Kingdom of God. This remarkable discrepancy was recognized also by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century German theologian, Richard Rothe, who expressed his uneasiness about received methods of expounding the Bible:

Our key does not open — the right key is lost and until we are put in possession of it again our exposition will never succeed. The system of biblical ideas *is not that of our schools* and so long as we attempt exegesis without it, the Bible will remain a half-closed book. We must enter upon it with other conceptions than those we have been accustomed to think the only possible ones.<sup>11</sup>

Our purpose is to show that the missing key which unlocks the message of Jesus, and indeed the whole Bible, is the Kingdom of God. The key, however, will be ineffective if it is bent out of shape. To make sense of what Jesus taught, we must understand the term “Kingdom of God” as he understood it. If we detach the Kingdom of God from its Jewish, biblical context and attach a new

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the Roman Catholic writer, Thomas Groome (Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 35-55. In footnote 16 to chapter 5, he cites a number of leading contemporary scholars who agree that the Kingdom of God dominates everything that Jesus taught.

<sup>10</sup> *Missiology*, April 1980, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by G.N.H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, rep. Kregel, 1952, p. 21, emphasis added.

meaning to it, we create a version of Christianity distorted at its very heart.

Without a grasp of the Kingdom, which is the axis around which all of Jesus' preaching and teaching revolves, we cannot hope to understand his Gospel message. The candid admissions of the scholars we have quoted suggest that Jesus' principal theme does not hold the central place in the teachings of the churches we call Christian. Indeed it is often omitted entirely! This can only mean that their systems of theology are in need of radical reformation.<sup>12</sup>

Such reformation will happen only when the Kingdom of God is: 1) Placed at the center of the salvation message where Jesus always placed it. 2) Defined in its biblical context as the goal of God's salvation program, as the restoration of sound government on earth under the supervision of the Messiah and the saints. This will depend on Jesus' return and the resurrection, at that time, of the faithful of all the ages.

This reformation of the Gospel might well take its cue from the excellent observation of Professor Burton Scott Easton in his article on "Salvation" in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1939):

Jesus' statement "the Kingdom of God is at hand" had the inseparable connotation "Judgment is at hand," and in this context, "Repent" (Mark 1:14, 15) must mean "lest you be judged." Hence our Lord's teaching about salvation had primarily a future content: positively, admission into the Kingdom of God, and negatively, deliverance from the preceding judgment.

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<sup>12</sup> In an article entitled "Preaching the Kingdom of God," the British expositor Dr. I. Howard Marshall of the University of Aberdeen says: "During the past sixteen years I can recollect only two occasions on which I have heard sermons specifically devoted to the theme of the Kingdom of God...I find this silence rather surprising because it is universally agreed by New Testament scholars that the central theme of the teaching of Jesus was the Kingdom of God...Clearly, then, one would expect the modern preacher who is trying to bring the message of Jesus to his congregation would have much to say about this subject. In fact my experience has been the opposite, and I have rarely heard about it" (*The Expository Times*, Oct. 1977, p. 13).

At present Jesus' saving Gospel message remains unclear in the minds of churchgoers. Those who heard the historical Jesus' call to salvation would have been exposed to a clear, vital message about the coming Kingdom of God on earth. Today invitations to salvation contain little or none of this information. A message confined to Jesus' death for sins has replaced Jesus' comprehensive Kingdom Gospel. It appears that the original Christian proclamation has suffered an alarming eclipse. Such a situation threatens the life of Christianity itself, since Jesus always made faith or belief in his Message the condition of salvation.

The amazing absence of the Kingdom of God from current presentations of the Gospel was noted by the Roman Catholic scholar B.T. Viviano:

As a teacher of New Testament literature...it early became obvious to me that the central theme of the preaching of the historical Jesus of Nazareth was the near approach of the Kingdom of God. Yet, to my amazement, this theme played hardly any role in the systematic theology I had been taught in the seminary. Upon further investigation I realized that this theme had in many ways been largely ignored in the theology and spirituality and liturgy of the church in the past two thousand years, and when not ignored, often distorted beyond recognition. How could this be?<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *The Kingdom of God in History*, Michael Glazier, 1988, p. 9.

## 2

# The Kingdom Expected by the Prophets

It must be significant that the Kingdom of God is the substance of the very first thing said about Jesus, even before his birth: “The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and his Kingdom will have no end” (Luke 1:32, 33).

This announcement by the angel Gabriel came as no surprise as a description of the role of the Messiah. What the angel promised was exactly what the faithful were hoping for. If we ask what had prompted this hope, the answer is simply: the message of all the prophets. The recurrent theme of the Hebrew prophets is that the Kingdom of God will be established throughout the world with a rehabilitated Jerusalem as its capital and the Messiah as God’s agent administering an ideal world government. This promise of perfect government on earth receives the fullest treatment by the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament. We may cite as typical of their vision of the future a selection from the numerous passages describing the reign of the promised descendant of David in a renewed earth. The expected world empire would be God’s Kingdom administered for Him by His unique representative and vice-regent, the Messiah.<sup>14</sup> “A throne will even be established in

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<sup>14</sup> The fact of the future Kingdom promised by the prophets is well known to standard authorities on biblical theology: “A constant feature in the eschatological picture of the Old Testament is Israel’s restoration to its own land...The question how in our day we are to interpret such prophecies is a double one. It is a question, first, of what the prophets meant. And to this question there can be but one answer — *their meaning is the literal sense of their words*. They spoke of the people of Israel and of the land of Canaan and predicted the restoration of the people to their land...There is no question as to the meaning of the Old Testament prophecies; the question is how far this meaning is now valid” (“Eschatology,” *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1911, vol. 1, p. 737, emphasis added). The real question, however, is whether we are prepared to believe the prophets. What the

lovingkindness and a judge [an administrator] will sit on it in faithfulness in the tent of David; moreover he will seek justice and be prompt in righteousness” (Isa. 16:5).

The simplicity of the concept is well captured by the same verse as translated by the Good News Bible: “Then one of David’s descendants will be King and he will rule the people with faithfulness and love. He will be quick to do what is right, and he will see that justice is done.”

What the prophets saw was a vision of utopian conditions on earth, following the conquest of the world by Yahweh (the Lord God) acting through His chosen agent, the promised King: “The Lord of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem” (Isa. 24:23). “He [the Messiah] will speak peace to the nations, and his dominion will be from sea to sea, and from the River [Euphrates] to the ends of the earth” (Zech. 9:10).

Obadiah describes the supremacy of Israel in the coming Messianic rule:

The community of Jacob will regain territory from those who took it from them...They will recover the Negev from Mount Esau and the Shephelah from the Philistines. They will regain the region of Ephraim and Gilead. The exiles of the people of Israel will annex Canaanite territory as far as Zarephath. The exiles who were in Sepharad will reclaim the Negev towns. Then governors will go up to Mount Zion to govern Mount Esau, and the Kingdom will be the Lord’s (Obad. 17-21).<sup>15</sup>

Evidently the Kingdom of God is to be a new political and territorial order with its headquarters in the promised land of Israel. This is the unanimous view of all the prophets. Jeremiah, too, had recorded the words of the Lord promising national restoration for Israel under the Messiah:

Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I shall raise up for David a righteous branch, and he will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. In his

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prophets predicted is clear. The problem is that the churches do not believe what they wrote! (Cp. Acts 26:27, where Paul challenged Agrippa with the question: “Do you believe the prophets?”)

<sup>15</sup> Translation based on the version in the *New International Commentary on the Old Testament* by J.C. Allen, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976.

days Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell securely (Jer. 23:5, 6).

Isaiah's and Micah's vision is no less clearly defined, with the additional guarantee of multilateral disarmament under the government of the Messiah:

A child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on his [the promised deliverer, the Messiah's] shoulders...There will be no end to the increase of his government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his Kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore...The law will go forth from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And he will judge between the nations and will render decisions for many peoples; and they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they train for war (Isa. 9:6, 7; 2:3, 4; Micah 4:2, 3).

One of the clearest descriptions of the Kingdom of God appears in Daniel 2:44. Following the destruction of hostile world powers, "the God of heaven will set up a Kingdom [clearly here a world empire] which will never be destroyed, and that Kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever." In Daniel 7 the same promised Kingdom is to be administered by the Son of Man (Jesus' favorite self-designation) and his followers, God's chosen people:

And to him [the Son of Man] was given a dominion, glory and a Kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which will not pass away; and his Kingdom is one which will not be destroyed...Then the power and greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the supreme God. Their royal power will never end and all rulers on earth will serve and obey them (Dan. 7:14, 27, Good News Bible).

The revolution associated with the Messiah's installment in his Kingdom is described by Zechariah:

The Lord will go forth and fight against those nations...and in that day the Lord will be king over all the earth...Then it will

come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts (Zech. 14:3, 9, 16).

These and many other passages in the prophets demonstrate beyond dispute that the Kingdom of God will be a new world government on earth, administered by the Messiah, God's chosen King, assisted by a group of associates called in Daniel "the saints of the Most High" (7:27). The picture of a restored earth is common to all the prophets. It is the basis of the Messianic hope summed up by the term "Kingdom of God."

The national hope of Israel of which the Christian Apostle Paul was fully supportive (Acts 24:14, 15; 26:5-8) had been described vividly and brilliantly by the great eighth-century BC prophet Isaiah. Paul was convinced that the Christian Gospel had been revealed, in advance of the coming of Christ, to the prophets of Israel (Rom. 1:1, 2; 16:25, 26; Gal. 3:8; Titus 1:2). Any severing of the Gospel from its revelation in the Old Testament Scriptures leads to a disastrous misunderstanding. When Paul writes about the Gospel he assumes that his readers know the background to the Gospel in the Old Testament. In our times, however, most readers approach the letters of Paul without that indispensable grasp of what the prophets meant by the Gospel.

A number of key passages in the prophets were recognized as testimonies to the restoration of sound government to Israel, the reinstatement of the monarchy of Israel in the person of the promised descendant of David. If the throne of David were not to reappear in Israel, with the Messiah as King, the whole Old Testament revelation would dissolve into pious legend, if not fraud.

Isaiah employs the verb "to preach the Gospel" in a number of passages:

Go up onto a high mountain, Zion, *herald of glad tidings*, cry out at the top of your voice, Jerusalem, *herald of good news!* Fear not to cry out and say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God! Here comes with power the Lord God, who rules by his strong arm; here is his reward with him, his recompense before him. Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs...Therefore on that day my people shall know my renown, that it is I who have foretold it. Here I am! How beautiful on the

mountains are the feet of him who *brings glad tidings*... announcing salvation and saying to Zion, 'Your God is King!' Hark! Your watchmen raise a cry, together they shout for joy, for they see directly, before their eyes, the Lord restoring Zion. Break out together in song, O ruins of Jerusalem! For the Lord comforts his people, he redeems Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm in the sight of all the nations; all the ends of the earth will behold the salvation of our God (Isa. 40:9-11; 52:6-10).

Jesus saw himself in the role of the preacher of this good news. At his inaugural speech in Luke 4:18, 19 he quoted Isaiah 61:1, 2: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to *bring glad tidings* to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, and to announce a year of favor [the ultimate Jubilee] from the Lord." Jesus appropriately ended the quotation at this point, but Isaiah's prediction takes in the future and final fulfillment of these words, "a day of vindication by our God."

Christianity as preached by Jesus is a confirmation of this sublime vision of the future of our world. Jesus was empowered at his first coming to heal and restore on a small scale only. The vast majority of the world remained in darkness. At his second coming he will inaugurate a worldwide restoration as announced by Peter (Acts 3:21). Unfortunately the church, under the influence of pagan Greek philosophy, gradually lost its grip on the prophets' grand proclamation of the Kingdom as a world government under the supervision of the immortalized Messiah. That promise of the good time coming was replaced by a pale, mystical and vague prospect of disembodied existence in "heaven." The collapse of the original Christian hope based on the teaching of Christ and the prophets of Israel, is traceable to the interpretative techniques (the term is too polite!) of such church fathers as Origen and Augustine, who explained away the plain meaning of the biblical text. The Bible provided in the Revelation a climactic prophecy of the Kingdom to which the rest of Scripture had looked forward. Augustine however chose to:

allegorize the statements of Revelation and apply them to the history of the church [thus destroying the future and moving it into the present]...The thousand years is not to be construed

literally, but represents the whole history of the church from the Incarnation to the final conflict. The reign of the saints is a prophecy of the domination of the world by the church [now!]. The resurrection is metaphorical and simply refers to the spiritual resurrection of the believer in Christ [now!]. But exegesis of this kind is *dishonest trifling*...To put such an interpretation on the phrase 'first resurrection' (Rev. 20:6) is simply playing with terms. If we explain away the obvious meaning of the words, then as Alford says, "There is an end to all significance in language and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, p. 941, emphasis added.

### 3

## Traditional Jewish and Christian Explanations

Taking their cue from the unified expectation of the prophets, the Jewish rabbis gathered from their Scriptures the following information about the Messiah and his future Kingdom:

1. The Messiah is to be a descendant of the house of David, and his purpose is to restore the Kingdom to Israel and extend its influence over the world.
2. In a last terrible battle for world domination the enemies of God, concentrated in a single Antichrist, will be defeated and destroyed.
3. The establishment of Messiah's Kingdom, following the defeat of Antichrist, will result in the spiritual and political supremacy of Israel, when all the nations will be taught to accept the unity of God, acknowledge the rule of His representative, the Messiah, and seek instruction from the law.

It is beyond question that the source of this information is the Hebrew Old Testament Scriptures. It is no less clear that the hope kindled by the prophets was fully confirmed by Gabriel when he designated Jesus as the promised ruler in whom the long-expected worldwide government would be realized: "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever" (Luke 1:32, 33).

Luke has given us in these verses a definitive Christian statement, on the highest authority, about the destiny of Jesus. He is to restore the fortunes of his people and rule the world from Jerusalem as the divinely appointed king. The hope was social, spiritual and political — and related *to the earth!* Belief in the coming Kingdom was the heart of New Testament Christianity as Luke, the traveling companion of Paul, taught it to Theophilus (Luke 1:1-4).

In the light of the unanimous message of the Hebrew prophets, the Jewish people have generally concluded that Jesus' claim to Messiahship should be rejected. They argue as follows: Since the claim to be Messiah implies that one will overthrow the world powers, and since Jesus did not overturn the Roman power in Palestine or establish the Kingdom of God, Jesus and his disciples were wrong in believing that he was the promised Messiah. The New Testament documents therefore present a false claim.

Faced with the same data, traditional Christianity has reasoned like this: Since Jesus claimed to be and was indeed the Messiah, and since the Roman rule in Palestine was not overturned and the Messianic Kingdom was not established on the earth, Jesus cannot have intended to carry out the Messianic program as the Jews expected. He must therefore have so reinterpreted the Messianic hope of the prophets as to exclude any idea of political revolution and the establishment of Messianic government on earth.

To support this line of reasoning, theologians have expended a great deal of scholarly energy in an effort to convince us that the Jewish understanding of the Kingdom and Jesus' conception of it were irreconcilably opposed. Above all we are not to think that Jesus had any political ambition. His objectives, so it has long been maintained, were entirely "spiritual." The gist of this long-standing and deeply entrenched conviction can be summarized as follows: Many in Israel were expecting salvation through a Messiah, an anointed one, whom God would send to rule an earthly kingdom. This Messiah would bring glory to Israel, destroying evil and establishing righteousness with irresistible power. What Jesus did was quite different. He established the Kingdom in the hearts of his followers.

Standard works constantly reflect the same view of Jesus and the Kingdom. Common to all of them, at least, is the recognition that the Kingdom of God was the basis of all that Jesus taught. But the Kingdom, far from being a world government, is reduced to an ethical rule of God in the hearts of men:

The burden of Jesus' message was: the Kingdom of God is the will of the heavenly father enthroned in the hearts of men. He taught that faith in God would bring in a new order of things in which the cares and fears of life would be abandoned...By prayer from hearts which have been purified through repentance

and sincere desire of a better life, the presence of God will be gained, His Kingdom will come and the reward of men will be fellowship with God.<sup>17</sup>

Astonishingly, this sort of description of the Kingdom of God has been accepted by the churchgoing public as a satisfactory reflection of the Kingdom which appears in the Christian documents. Yet the popular view omits any reference to the *second* coming of Jesus and the subsequent Messianic Kingdom on earth. Moreover, the standard definition of the Kingdom is open to a major objection: it is utterly self-contradictory to claim to be the Messiah and at the same time to reject altogether the *political* role which the Hebrew Scriptures designate for the Messiah and which is the main point of Messiahship! It makes no sense at all that Jesus could speak of the Kingdom of God (and of himself as Messiah) while denying the meaning of that phrase as the restoration of a worldwide theocratic government on earth, with Jerusalem as the metropolis of a new society, as all the Hebrew prophets had envisaged it. The rejection of the external, political Kingdom is all the more impossible when one constantly affirms, as Jesus did, that the Hebrew Scriptures are the inspired and authoritative source of all religious truth. Since no new political order on earth appeared as a result of Jesus' ministry, commentators have chosen between two alternatives: either Jesus did not in fact ever claim to be the Messiah, in which case his disciples must have mistakenly attributed that title to him; or he did indeed claim to be the Messiah, but used the title and the phrase "Kingdom of God" in a radically new way which divorced it forever from its Old Testament roots, above all divesting it of any political significance.

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<sup>17</sup> *New Age Encyclopedia*, London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, 1925, Vol. 6, pp. 176, 177.

## 4

# A Third Solution

Neither of these solutions does justice to the evidence of the biblical documents. In both cases large sections of the available data are simply not being taken into account. The suggestion that Jesus did not in fact claim to be the Messiah would render the whole New Testament fraudulent. But it is no less problematic to argue that Jesus abandoned the Jewish, Old Testament national hope for a worldwide Messianic government, foreseen by all the prophets. Ample evidence exists in the New Testament to show that he did no such thing. There remains, therefore, a third option. With his contemporaries, Jesus normally used the phrase “Kingdom of God” to describe the new worldwide political order on earth promised by sacred Scripture, but he and his Apostles sometimes extended the term to include a preliminary and preparatory stage in the divine plan for the Kingdom:

1. His announcement of the Messianic Kingdom of God in advance of its establishment worldwide at Jesus’ return to the earth in power and glory.
2. A demonstration of the Kingdom’s power invested in Jesus, and his chosen followers, manifested in their healing and exorcism.
3. The recruiting of disciples through Jesus’ ministry and their training for leadership in the coming Messianic Kingdom, as well as participation in the announcement of the Kingdom prior to its coming.
4. The death of the Messiah for the sins of the world.
5. His ascension and session at the right hand of the Father (as predicted by the all-important Psalm 110:1)<sup>18</sup> pending his return

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<sup>18</sup> This verse is cited or alluded to in the New Testament more than any other Old Testament passage. It is obviously of the greatest importance for our understanding of apostolic Christianity.

to inaugurate the Kingdom as the renewed social and political order on earth.

It is important to note that these preliminary developments in preparation for the Kingdom were not clearly distinguished by the Old Testament prophets from the full establishment of the Kingdom worldwide, though in retrospect we can see plain indications of the two phases of the divine program scattered throughout Old Testament Scripture. In traditional Christianity, talk of the Kingdom of God as in some sense a description of the Christian life *now* has overshadowed, to the point of obscuring and even eliminating, the Kingdom as the *future* establishment of the divine rule worldwide, which for Jesus and the whole New Testament, as well as for the prophets, *is to be the great event inaugurated by his Second Coming*.<sup>19</sup>

The Kingdom taught by Jesus is first and foremost the new order on earth associated with a great future crisis in history, to be marked by his return in power. For Jesus the Kingdom had not yet come. Its coming is to be prayed for.<sup>20</sup> Certainly the power of the Kingdom had been displayed in his ministry, but this was only a foretaste of the coming of the Kingdom, which still lay in the future, and depended entirely on the return of Jesus, as King, to set it up.

If the New Testament is read from a perspective which allows for *both* a present preliminary manifestation of the spirit and power of the Kingdom as well as its future worldwide inauguration and establishment at the Second Coming, it becomes clear that Jesus never for one moment deprived the Kingdom of God of the political and territorial significance given to it by the prophets and

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<sup>19</sup> Cp. *The Century Bible, Introduction to Thessalonians* (London: Caxton Publishing Co., n.d.), p. 29: "It has been recently argued that the Kingdom of God was the principal topic in the teaching of Jesus, who whenever he spoke of the Kingdom of God meant that triumphant new order of the future which would be set up on his return to this world in glory with the angels." The reference is to Johannes Weiss' *Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes (Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom)*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971, first pub. 1892). Weiss rightly saw that Jesus spoke always of a real kingdom of the future. He then proceeded to tell us that such teaching was irrelevant for us now!

<sup>20</sup> Matt. 6:10, "Thy Kingdom come." Joseph of Arimathea was *waiting* for it (Mark 15:43).

incorporated into Jewish religion as the nation's great hope. Jesus did not, however, *at his first coming* expect to introduce the Messianic Kingdom as a worldwide political empire. Nevertheless, all his teaching was directed towards preparing his followers for the future arrival of the Messianic Kingdom. At the end of his ministry he submitted himself to crucifixion at the hands of Roman and Jewish authorities, promising that he would return after resurrection and an interval unspecified, to inaugurate the Kingdom politically, both in Israel and universally. This resolution of the divine drama would fulfill in every detail the predictions of all Old Testament prophecy, as well as vindicating Jesus' claim to Messiahship.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Cp. *The Century Bible, Introduction to Thessalonians*, p. 30: "What the Jews looked for at the first coming of Christ, the Christians were inclined to look for at the Second Coming."

## 5

# The Non-Political Messiah of Traditional Christianity

Traditional versions of Christianity have been curiously reluctant to acknowledge the political dimension of Jesus' teaching. Commentators have labored to exclude it, employing a battery of different devices to explain it away. This process has involved nothing less than a *tour de force* by which the plainest biblical statements have been emptied of their obvious meaning.

These techniques have not escaped criticism from those expositors who realized that violence was being done to the sacred text. The remark of Albert Schweitzer deserves to be quoted in this context: "Many of the greatest sayings [of Jesus] are found lying in a corner like explosive shells, from which the charges have been removed... We have made Jesus hold another language with our time from that which he really held."<sup>22</sup> The words of Jesus suffered an eclipse.

Schweitzer was persuaded that Jesus' sense of crisis and the end of the world represented the very heart of his mind and message and that our records do not make any sense unless they are seen in this light.

Another commentator, David Baron, complained that the words of the prophets had been mishandled by expositors in a way which eliminated the reality of the future Kingdom of God. What Baron says of the commentaries on the prophet Zechariah applies equally well to much traditional treatment of the Kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus:

Almost all the existing works on this prophetic book are in one way or another defective, and some of them are even misleading. The older commentaries, though commendable for their reverent spiritual tone and practical teaching, and some of them

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<sup>22</sup> *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, New York: MacMillan, 1968, first pub. 1910, p. 400.

containing a good deal of sound philological and historical material, are more or less vitiated by the allegorizing principle of interpretation by means of which *all reference to a concrete Kingdom of God on earth, a literal restoration of Israel and the visible appearing and reign of Messiah are explained away.*<sup>23</sup>

Since the Kingdom of God was the heart of all that Jesus taught, and since he fully endorsed the hopes of the prophets,<sup>24</sup> the removal of the Messianic Kingdom will threaten the substance of Jesus' Christian message. The untold damage done by the "allegorizing principle of interpretation" (a sophisticated phrase for "explaining away") has not been limited to the book of Zechariah. Almost all standard commentaries on the New Testament are defective for the reason stated by David Baron. The teaching of Jesus suffered a devastating blow when expositors no longer acknowledged that the Kingdom of God means primarily and dominantly what it had always meant to the prophets: a "concrete" Kingdom of God on the earth to be initiated by the event known in the Old Testament as the Day of the Lord and in the New as the Second Coming of Jesus.<sup>25</sup> The usual meaning of the term "Kingdom of God" on Jesus' lips is the new order to be inaugurated by his return. This corresponds exactly with the Old Testament's descriptions of God reigning (i.e., in the person of His chosen King, the Messiah).<sup>26</sup> Traditional theology seems to have forgotten that Jesus came to "confirm the promises made to the fathers" (Rom. 15:8), and the fathers, beginning with Abraham, were expecting to "inherit the world" (Rom. 4:13). The promises made to Abraham, which the New Testament endorses, were based on the hope of taking charge of the earth. Jesus' promise of reward to his disciples was described in terms of governmental office:

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<sup>23</sup> *The Prophecies of Zechariah*, London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1962, pp. viii, ix, emphasis added.

<sup>24</sup> Matt. 5:17, "Think not that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets." Rom. 15:8, "Jesus Christ was a minister to the circumcision to confirm the promises made to the fathers."

<sup>25</sup> See for example 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 2:2; 1 Cor. 1:8; 2 Cor. 1:14. The Day of the Lord is the same as the day of Christ's future coming.

<sup>26</sup> See, in addition to many other passages, Isa. 52:7-10; 32:1; Ps. 2; Zech. 14:9ff.; Rev. 11:15-18; Pss. 96-101, which describe the day on which "the Lord has become King" — *begun* to reign.

“Take charge of ten cities,” Luke 19:17). The hope kindled by Jesus is no different. He promised the meek that they would one day “inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5), and that God would then “give them the Kingdom” (Luke 12:32). *New Testament Christianity promises its adherents administrative positions in a new government destined to appear on earth when Jesus returns* (Rev. 5:10).

A Messiah who fails to take up his office as ruler of a universal empire centered in Jerusalem is not the Messiah expected by the prophets and promised by Gabriel to Mary (Luke 1:32, 33). It is fair to ask, therefore, whether the Jesus of traditional theology, of whom little or nothing is ever said in regard to a world empire on earth inaugurated by a future crisis, can be the Jesus Messiah of the Bible.

## 6

# The Future Political Kingdom in the Teaching of Jesus

A number of critically important sayings of Jesus have not received the attention they deserve. These are verses which demonstrate that Jesus was very much conscious of the political nature of the Kingdom which as Messiah he was destined to administer upon his return at the end of the age.

Anyone claiming to be the promised Son of David could not have failed to be impressed by the fundamental importance of the covenant made with David, described in 2 Samuel 7 (parallel to 1 Chron. 17).<sup>27</sup> As is well known, this formed the basis of God's promise to bring about peace on earth through His chosen King.<sup>28</sup> It was widely recognized from a reading of the Hebrew Scriptures that the glory of David's kingdom would eventually be restored to Israel, with benefits for the whole world, when the Messiah entered upon his reign. Thus it was that prominent disciples of Jesus were eagerly awaiting the "consolation of Israel" not only before Jesus' birth, but after he had completed his brief ministry in Palestine. The national expectation of the Messianic reign remains central to the Christian records: the righteous and devout Simeon was "looking for the consolation of Israel, and the holy spirit was upon him" (Luke 2:25). Anna the prophetess, commended by Luke for her exceptional devotion to God, was "looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38). Joseph of Arimathea, whom Matthew describes as a disciple of Jesus (Matt. 27:57), was "a good and honorable man...who was waiting for the Kingdom of God" (Luke 23:50, 51). This was after Jesus' death. He evidently did not

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<sup>27</sup> The importance of this covenant is seen in the references to it in Ps. 72, 89, and Luke 1:32, 33.

<sup>28</sup> This divine intervention is vividly described in the Psalms, especially Ps. 2 and 10. Both the Qumran community and the Christians saw the application of 2 Sam. 7:14 to the promised deliverer (cp. Heb. 1:5; Luke 1:32, 33).

believe the Kingdom had come with the ministry of Jesus, even though, certainly, the records describe his ministry as an anticipation of the Kingdom (Matt. 11:5).

Likewise, the thief on the cross recognized the certainty of the future coming of the Kingdom when he pleaded with Jesus for a part in it: “Jesus, remember me when you come into [i.e., to inaugurate] your Kingdom” (Luke 23:42).

Precisely the same enthusiasm for the Kingdom and the Gospel had prompted the request by the mother of James and John on behalf of her children. Her petition reveals the biblical Christian idea of the Messianic Kingdom, and Jesus did nothing at all to disturb her understanding of the kind of kingdom this would be. “Command that in your Kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right hand and one on your left” (Matt. 20:21).

The Kingdom she had in mind was certainly not limited to a kingdom “in the heart.” Jesus’ reply confirmed that the honor of sitting in a principal place in the future Kingdom was reserved “for those for whom it has been prepared” (Mark 10:40). Moreover, he added that greatness in the coming Kingdom of God is for those who first accept the role of a servant, as he himself had done (Mark 10:42-45; cp. Phil. 2:5-8). But there is no question in Jesus’ mind about the nature of the future Kingdom, nor about status in it. The disciples were not rebuked for any misunderstanding about the fact of a future Kingdom in which positions could be held. They needed only to learn that the path to greatness lay through humility, suffering and servanthood.

The question of the Christian goal is immensely important in the records of Jesus’ teaching. The Apostles were instructed by Jesus to recognize the promised Messianic Kingdom as the heart of the New Covenant. For them the supreme objective of the Christian life was to assist the Messiah in the administration of his Kingdom. At the last supper, he said to them: “I covenant with you, just as my Father has covenanted with me, to grant you a Kingdom that you may eat and drink at my table in my Kingdom, and you will sit on thrones administering the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:29, 30).

Only a few moments earlier Jesus had said that he would not drink the wine of the Passover with them again until the Passover

would be “fulfilled in the Kingdom of God,” that is “until the Kingdom of God comes” (Luke 22:16, 18). Then they would eat and drink in his presence, reunited with him, as executives of the Kingdom. This glorious occasion was to be “in the New Age [literally, “when the world is reborn”] when the Son of Man sits on his throne of glory” (Matt. 19:28).

The Apostles were in no doubt about when this would be, for Jesus also said: “When the Son of Man comes...*then* he will sit on his throne of glory” (Matt. 25:31).

The implications of all this are clear for all to read. There will be a Kingdom inaugurated by the return of Christ at the beginning of the New Age. There will be thrones and government over the twelve tribes regathered in the land. And there will be fellowship with Jesus in that New Age, a fellowship not to be renewed “until the Kingdom comes” (Luke 22:18).

While this information about the Kingdom of God forms the framework of all that Jesus taught, how far does it play any part at all in what we have come to call Christianity?

## 7

# The Departing and Returning Nobleman

On another occasion Jesus had thrown further light on the Kingdom of God by comparing himself to a nobleman who was destined to depart and later return to take charge of his father's kingdom. Jesus told this parable in order to clarify, in the simplest terms, the stages of the divine plan in history. Since he and his disciples were in the vicinity of Jerusalem, approaching the city which everyone recognized would be the capital of the Kingdom, his audience — many of whom had accepted his claim to Messiahship — very reasonably expected “that the Kingdom of God was going to appear immediately” (Luke 19:11).

Luke's account leaves us in no doubt that the Kingdom of God under discussion was a kingdom based in Jerusalem, and the geographical proximity of the king to the capital prompted the excitement that the hopes of the prophets and the nation were now finally to be realized. The parable which followed was to teach the lesson that the Kingdom was not to appear *immediately*. That it would appear eventually was not in question. Moreover its appearance would mean the destruction of Jesus' enemies: “These enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence” (Luke 19:27).

Not for one moment did Jesus suggest that the people had misunderstood the nature of the Kingdom, or that they should look only for a kingdom “in the heart.” By means of a simple story about the nobleman, he made it clear that the Kingdom of God would not be publicly inaugurated until he returned from heaven after having received from the Father his royal authority. At his return he would exercise his royal power by executing his enemies for refusal to submit to his sovereignty (Luke 19:27). At the same time his faithful followers were to be rewarded for their productive service while the master had been absent, by being put in charge of urban populations in the Kingdom (Luke 19:17).

The parable made perfect sense as a confirmation of what the celebrated Psalm 2 had predicted of the Messiah, the Lord's anointed. According to this Psalm, God has promised to give His Messiah "the nations as his inheritance and the very ends of the earth as his possession" (v. 8). The king was to "break them with an iron rod and shatter them like earthenware" (v. 9). In the same Psalm the world rulers whom the Messiah confronted at his return were urged to "do homage to the Son, lest he become angry and destroy you" (v. 12). Both the Jews and Jesus recognized in Psalm 2 a forecast of the Messiah's conquest of the world at his arrival in power. In Jesus, the Christian community saw "a male child who is to rule the nations with a rod of iron" (Rev. 12:5). Indeed the challenge to a position of "authority over the nations" was designed by the risen Jesus to spur the faithful on to the end (Rev. 2:26).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See Rev. 11:15; 12:5; 12:10; 19:15 for the application of Psalm 2 to Jesus; also Acts 4:25, 26; 13:33, the latter reference being to the conception/begetting of Jesus when God brought him into being (cp. Matt. 1:20, "begotten"; Luke 1:35). Acts 13:34, in contrast to verse 33, speaks of his resurrection. Acts 13:33 speaks of the begetting of the Son of God in the womb of his mother.

## 8

# Jesus, the Jewish-Christian Messiah

The data we have examined reveals a Jesus who is a thoroughly political figure, though he wielded none of his political authority *at his first coming* and kept himself and his followers strictly apart from the politics of the day.<sup>30</sup> He demonstrated in his ministry the qualities of tenderness and compassion which justify his claim to reflect the character of his Father. The contrast between the suffering servant who is later to become the conquering king shows the extraordinary range of the personality of Jesus. In the first century he did not “quarrel nor cry out...A battered reed he will not break off and a smoldering wick he will not put out” (Matt. 12:19, 20). Nor did he then make judgments on secular matters; but at his return in glory he is destined to fight and judge the nations and rule them with a rod of iron (Rev. 19:15). Any portrait which does not allow the colors of both aspects of the Messiah’s activity is hopelessly distorted. Belief in the Jesus of history, who is of necessity also the Jesus of faith, must be based on the full range of revealed truth about him.

Traditional Christian teaching has almost entirely discarded the political element in the teaching of Jesus, either by neglecting the sayings about rulership which he expected for himself and his disciples, or by claiming, against the plainest evidence of the New Testament, that the executive positions promised to his disciples were to be assumed *now*, before the Second Coming. The theory that the Apostles were offered kingship over the *church* is in collision with the clear teaching of the New Testament that it is “in

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<sup>30</sup> There is a sense in which Jesus’ mission was thoroughly political from the start. The New Testament describes him as battling with the supernatural forces of Satan. It would be proper to call this involvement in “cosmic politics.” For biblical Christianity the battle between Jesus and Satan is the real issue. And it is a struggle for world domination yet to be resolved, though the promise of Jesus’ ultimate triumph is assured. God, in Christ, is recovering rebel earth from the clutches of the Devil. Because of human stubbornness and blindness, however, Satan is still “the god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4; 1 John 5:19; Rev. 12:9).

the New Age when Jesus comes in his glory” (Matt. 19:28; 25:31), and not before, that the Messiah’s followers are to share rulership with him. The nobleman in the parable had to return *from* heaven before he was authorized to deal with his enemies and rule with the faithful in his kingdom. Until Jesus comes back the disciples are to persist in praying “Thy Kingdom come,” and it is not until “the Kingdom comes” (Luke 22:18) that Jesus sits down with his disciples in the Kingdom in which he promises them a share.

The widely held view that the promise of rulership applies to the period *prior* to the Second Coming represents a fatal dislocation of the biblical scheme, and has had the tragic effect of promoting an entirely unbiblical view of the future and drawing a veil over the reality of the Kingdom of God to be put into office when Jesus returns. The mind of Jesus is fully revealed in the Revelation which he communicated through the beloved disciple John. We find him corroborating his exhortation to persist until the Great Day:

Hold fast until I come. To those who win the victory, who continue to the end to do what I want, I will give the same authority that I received from my Father: I will give them authority over the nations, to rule them with an iron rod, and to break them in pieces like clay pots...To those who win the victory I will give the right to sit beside me on my throne, just as I have been victorious and sit by my Father on His throne (Rev. 2:25-27; 3:21).

These are the words of the Savior himself (“The Son of God...says this,” Rev. 2:18), and the churches are exhorted to “hear what the Spirit says” to them. It is hard to see how the average churchgoer possesses anything like the outlook on the future inculcated by Jesus in these verses. Traditional Christianity appears to have made nothing of these dramatic Christian teachings. The words we have cited in Revelation are, after all, only a confirmation of what Jesus had already laid before the Apostles as the goal of their discipleship — to join him in administering a renewed Israel and the world.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the fact that this full-blooded Messianic hope was instilled by Jesus, commentators have expressed their antipathy to

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<sup>31</sup> Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30; Rev. 2:26; 3:21; 5:10; 20:1-6.

his Messianism by labeling the activity of the Messiah described in Psalm 2 and echoed in Jesus' words in Revelation as "unchristian." They do not see how the activity of the king described in Psalm 2 can have any relevance to Jesus. Despite his own quotation of Psalm 2 with reference to himself and his church, the following comment is not untypical:

Psalm 2 cannot be strictly regarded as referring to Jesus, partly because the establishment of the King upon the holy hill of Zion would have no relevance in his case; partly because the conception of his function as dashing his enemies in pieces is unchristian.<sup>32</sup>

Theologians who canvass this point of view are caught in a tragic contradiction. While they say that they accept Jesus as the Christ, they attempt to circumscribe his activities in a way which would exclude a major part of biblical Messiahship. Jesus does not share the qualms of the theologians about the second Psalm, for in the Revelation which he granted to John, and through him to the church, he actually urges the faithful to press on to the goal which is to share Messianic "authority over the nations." The promises of royal privilege are clear beyond any dispute in Revelation 2:26, 3:21, 5:10 and 20:1-6, as they are in Matthew 19:28 and Luke 22:28-30 (quoted earlier). In Revelation 3:21 Jesus carefully distinguishes between his present coordination with the Father on the Father's throne and his future reign on his own Davidic throne in the Messianic Kingdom: "I will give them the right to sit beside me on my throne, just as I have been victorious and sit by my Father on His throne." All this is precisely what we anticipate from Jesus' teaching in the Gospels and from the Old Testament which Jesus accepted as the authoritative word of God.

The recognition and acceptance of the Messianic tone of Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom will throw an entirely new light on his person and ministry. It is widely recognized that our understanding of "last things" (eschatology) has somehow fallen into a state of

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<sup>32</sup> *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, Vol. 2, p. 452. At the Second Coming Jesus will act as the agent of God's wrath against a hostile world. Meanwhile Christians are required to deal non-violently with their enemies (Matt. 5:39, 40).

confusion,<sup>33</sup> with the most brilliant of commentators apparently doing their best to be rid of the whole problem of the future. It is important to realize that confusion over the future means confusion over the Gospel of Jesus which is inextricably bound up with an apocalyptic view of history, a view which sees the whole challenge of human existence in a striving towards participation in the Kingdom of God to be manifested in the New Age inaugurated by the Second Coming. Once it is seen that the Old Testament apocalyptic hope for a final divine intervention in the affairs of our world remains undiminished in the New Testament, theology will return to proclaiming the message of Jesus about the Kingdom of God rather than using an extraordinary armory of critical devices designed apparently to dismiss from the teaching of Jesus anything that cannot be harmonized with “our modern scientific view.”

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<sup>33</sup>Ramm speaks of “the hopeless division of evangelical Christianity in prophetic and eschatological matters” (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, Baker, 1970, p. 244).

## 9

# The Undefined Future Kingdom of Traditional Christianity

In the teaching of Jesus the future is always prominent and the present is meaningful as a preparation for the end of the age when Jesus returns. Any theology which does not operate within this framework has lost its foundation in the Bible.

Scholarship recognizes that Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God as future and yet as in some sense present. Beyond this it seems reluctant to go. It has not defined what is meant by the *future* Kingdom. This vagueness about the Kingdom leads automatically to a vagueness about the Gospel — which is the Gospel about the Kingdom — and threatens to obscure the whole Christian message.

The New Testament is not silent, as we have seen, about the future Kingdom. If it only occasionally spells out the details of the future theocracy of the Messiah in which the church is to take part as executives with Christ, this is because it assumes that the doctrine of the Kingdom will be understood from the Old Testament. It never hints that the much greater detail provided by the prophets has been superseded. All that the prophets had revealed about the future Kingdom and the reign of the Messiah awaits fulfillment at the coming of Jesus in glory. The hope for the restoration of Israel (Acts 1:6) is everywhere implied as part of the Christian heritage which Jesus never questioned. This was particularly clear from Jesus' promise to the Apostles that they will preside over the twelve tribes in the New Age (Matt. 19:28). The idea does not originate in the New Testament. The Psalmist had foreseen a time when regathered Israel would live in peace under the administration of the "thrones of the house of David" (Psalm 122:5). Isaiah had spoken of Jerusalem restored to perfection, her administrators purified "as at the first" (Isa. 1:26), and of an ideal King ruling with his princes (Isa. 32:1). In the New Testament the book of Revelation quite deliberately and specifically gathers

together the strands of Messianic prophecy and relates them to the Second Coming. It is the Christian Apocalypse. How can it be anything else since its author is Jesus Christ? (Rev. 1:1) To speak of the Apocalypse as “Jewish,” as if this means it is not therefore Christian, is fundamentally confusing. Christianity is itself thoroughly Jewish. Jesus is a Jew whose teaching is rooted in the heritage of Israel. In the book of Revelation he confirms much of what had been already recorded in the Gospels. Jesus’ exhortations to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 show that he subscribed wholeheartedly to the traditional Messianism of the Old Testament. This fact cannot be avoided except by the drastic expedient of denying the authorship of the Revelation to the risen Christ and excising a mass of apocalyptic sayings from the Gospels.

It is the tragedy of critical scholarship that, in desperation to create a Jesus who conforms to *its* view of what the Savior should be, it has attempted a presentation of Christianity which simply ignores or eliminates large amounts of the Christian records. It has thus proposed a radical reconstruction of the Old and New Testament doctrine of the Kingdom, and then attributed its own creation to Jesus!

# 10

## Theology's Elimination of the Future Kingdom

The theological writings of our time are full of evidence to show how unfairly the teaching of Jesus about the Kingdom has been treated. Some of the most distinguished commentators seem to be determined to do away with the eschatological Kingdom of which Jesus spoke so habitually. Protests against such wholesale eradication of Jesus' teaching often appear only in footnotes. They deserve a much wider press.

For example, Leon Morris speaks of C.H. Dodd's "realized eschatology" — the theory that the Kingdom had arrived with the ministry of Jesus and should not be looked for in the future — as "unsatisfactory to many." Unsatisfactory! It effectively wipes out the hope of the Kingdom to which the whole New Testament, indeed the whole Bible, strains. Leon Morris explains Professor Dodd's theory: "The eschaton [the end of the age] has moved from the future to the present, from the sphere of expectation to that of realized experience."<sup>34</sup>

According to Dodd there is no room in the teaching of Jesus for his real return. The reaction of the ordinary reader of the Bible will be one of horrified amazement that a professor of the New Testament could reach this conclusion. Morris goes on to say that the theory of realized eschatology "has been decisively rejected by many modern scholars." He quotes J.E. Fison as saying that "realized eschatology is frankly and flatly heretical by the standards of a considerable portion of the New Testament evidence." Emil Brunner is equally outspoken:

It is clear that the future coming is anything but a piece of mythology which can be dispensed with. Whatever the form of the event may be, the whole point lies in the fact that it will

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<sup>34</sup> *New International Commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, p. 147.

happen. To try to boggle at it means to boggle at the foundation of the faith, to smash the cornerstone by which all coheres and apart from which all falls to pieces. Faith in Jesus Christ without the expectation of his Parousia [Second Coming] is a voucher that is never redeemed, a promise that is not seriously meant. A Christian faith without the expectation of the Parousia is like a ladder that leads nowhere but ends in a void.”<sup>35</sup>

These are words brilliantly spoken and all too true. The fact is that millions of churchgoers have no grasp at all of the future coming of Jesus to the earth, much less of the reality of the Kingdom which he has promised to inaugurate *on earth* at that time. And yet the Kingdom of God and the Second Coming which will introduce it are the center and heart of the Christian Gospel! In the absence of a clear exposition of the Kingdom, there clearly can be no authentic Christianity.

J.E. Fison's and Emil Brunner's insistence upon the great future event is to be welcomed with enthusiasm, but it is quite unsatisfactory to speak of the Kingdom so vaguely — “Whatever the form of the event may be” — when the New Testament and the Old Testament in which it is rooted speak quite specifically. The restored theocracy is described in vivid detail by the prophets. Sufficient is said in the New Testament to prove that the great Day of the Lord, which according to the Old Testament will introduce the Kingdom, is now associated with the return of Jesus in power and glory. A mass of material is found in the Old Testament describing world events which will precede and follow the Day of the Lord. A description of them must await a subsequent chapter.

We conclude our present discussion with a summary of its underlying thesis. Any claim that Jesus is the promised Messiah is incoherent unless the term “Messiah” is understood in its biblical context. There is no evidence in the New Testament that Jesus rejected any part of the role predicted for the Messiah in the Old Testament. He did not, however, *at his first coming*, seek to take up the Messianic office as world ruler. It is a colossal mistake,

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* It is instructive to reflect on the alarming fact that a distinguished New Testament scholar could have “smashed the cornerstone” of New Testament faith. This may lead to further consideration of what some “scholarship” is up to!

however, to maintain that he *never* expected to govern the world as Messiah, the King, enthroned in Jerusalem. At his first coming he called and prepared his disciples for their part in the future Kingdom, and then submitted to death at the hands of the hostile Jewish and Roman officials. The resurrection of Jesus which followed is the guarantee that he has overcome death and is therefore in a position one day to return to the earth to fulfill the remainder of the Messianic mission and realize the prophets' vision of peace on earth.

Jesus came back to life after being dead for three days. "By many irrefutable proofs" (Acts 1:3) his resurrection from death was established as historical fact. He was in personal contact with the Apostles who had known him intimately. As Peter reported, "we ate and drank with him after he awoke from death" (Acts 10:41). Jesus demonstrated in his own person ("I myself," Luke 24:39) that as an immortalized human being he remained visible, palpable, and corporeal ("A ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have," Luke 24:39). For some six weeks an immortal human being, the first member of the new creation, socialized with mortals — a preview of the same phenomenon to be experienced on a far greater scale in the coming Kingdom. After 40 days Jesus made his final departure (Acts 1:9-11).

The Messiah continues at the right hand of the Father to administer his church, whom he invites to share in the Messianic glory of the Coming Age. The failure of "theology" to do justice to this simple biblical scheme lies in its antipathy to things Messianic (and thus to the Messiah himself), and it has therefore lost sight of the central biblical fact that Jesus is the Messiah destined not only to die for the sins of mankind but to reign over the earth in a future theocracy initiated by his Second Coming. The primary task of churches, if they are to be the Church, is to proclaim that stupendous Good News.

## **PART 2**

### **Biblical Christianity's Messianic Framework and Its Disappearance from the Church**

# 1

## Salvation Through the Messiah

The Old and New Testaments are thoroughly Messianic documents. John Bright points out that the Messianic Kingdom is the unifying theme of Scripture:

For the concept of the Kingdom of God involves, in a real sense, the total message of the Bible. Not only does it loom large in the teachings of Jesus, it is to be found, in one form or another, through the length and breadth of the Bible...Old Testament and New Testament thus stand together as the two acts of a single drama. Act I points to its conclusion in Act II, and without it the play is an incomplete, unsatisfying thing. But Act II must be read in the light of Act I, else its meaning will be missed. For the play is organically one. The Bible is one book. Had we to give that book a title, we might with justice call it "The Book of the Coming Kingdom of God."<sup>36</sup>

It is essential to remind ourselves that since Christ is only a translation of the Hebrew word for Messiah (= God's anointed King), the word "Christianity" actually means "Messianity." Christians, in the biblical sense, are therefore "Messianists," followers of the Messiah. In view of these definitions it is a little disconcerting to find a leading New Testament scholar saying:

Today Messianism is dead, except for the sectarian fringe. Practically no one expresses his deepest convictions or hopes about the universe in these categories...No one seriously looks for a Messiah who will be the single solution to all the world's problems, spiritually or politically.<sup>37</sup>

The point is that the New Testament, from beginning to end, *does* look for the solution to all the world's ills in a returning Messiah.<sup>38</sup> For the New Testament Christians, the salvation effected by the death of Jesus did not complete the Messianic

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<sup>36</sup> *Kingdom of God*, New York: Abingdon Press, 1953, pp. 7, 197.

<sup>37</sup> J.A.T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, SCM Press, 1973, p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Our quotation may well prompt the question as to how far some scholarship is in sympathy with the New Testament.

drama. The world remained under the dominion and deception of Satan, who is its “god” (2 Cor. 4:4), and this awful situation will only be put right by the reappearance of the Messiah at the end of the age. This is the authentic Christian outlook founded upon the prophets, the Apostles and Jesus himself.

But if no one except in the sectarian fringe now expects a Messianic resolution of our problems, it must be that the biblical Christian hope has been replaced by something else. If so, it is not surprising that contemporary churchgoers find it difficult to relate sympathetically to much in Jesus’ teaching. If they are strangers to things Messianic — and Jesus is the Messiah — they will inevitably be strangers to Jesus, and he to them.

The New Testament presents Jesus’ claim to Messiahship as the very heart of Christianity. All the titles conferred on Jesus by the New Testament stem directly from his claim to be the Messiah. Salvation, priesthood and kingship are the three basic ingredients of the office of Messiah. Moreover, the claim to be the Messiah is an exclusive claim. There can be only one genuine claimant and it is the purpose of biblical Christianity to show that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the genuine Messiah. If we then ask how Jesus’ authenticity is to be judged and assessed, the answer is simply that he fits the mold created for the Messiah by the Old Testament. The New Testament insists that Jesus has been able to do what the Scriptures say the Messiah must, in the divine plan, accomplish. But the story is incomplete until the Messiah is installed as world ruler, restoring sound government to the earth. It is towards this Messianic future that the New Testament strains in verse after verse. All is orientated towards the great coming crisis at which world power will change hands from Satan to Jesus.

An examination of the work of Paul and Peter in the book of Acts will show that they directed their efforts to demonstrating that Jesus was the promised King of Israel and Savior of the world. Not only that, they made it clear that the resurrection of the Messiah and his present session with his Father form a prelude to the next great event in the divine program of salvation: the return of Jesus to the earth. To the reasonable question as to why Jesus, if he is the Messiah destined to rule on David’s throne, had left the earth, Peter responded: “Heaven must retain Jesus, the Messiah

appointed for you, until the period of the Restoration of all things, about which times God spoke by the mouth of all His holy prophets from ancient time” (Acts 3:20, 21).

To Peter it is quite evident that the Messianic program is incomplete until the Restoration foreseen by all the prophets takes place. At that time God will send the Messiah (Acts 3:20). Until then “heaven must retain him.” Peter’s outlook reflects the point of view of his Master who had promised the Apostles: “In the New Age when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones to rule the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28).

The scheme underlying the New Testament is based on a well known and remarkable portion of Psalm 110, which provided the subject matter of an interesting dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees:

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question: “What do you think about the Messiah, whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How does David under inspiration call him ‘lord,’ saying, ‘The Lord said to my lord, sit at My right hand until I put your enemies beneath your feet.’ If David calls him ‘lord,’ how is he his son?” (Matt. 22:41-45).

The answer, of course, is that the Messiah was to be both David’s descendant — his son<sup>39</sup> — and at the same time, paradoxically, his lord. The stinging point of Jesus’ query was that David acknowledged Jesus as the Lord Messiah even before he had been born. The Pharisees, however, were unwilling to acknowledge that Jesus was the Lord Messiah, though they could have known that he was a descendant of David, and had witnessed the miracles which accompanied his claims.

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<sup>39</sup> The descent of Jesus from David is traced by Matthew through Solomon (Matt. 1:6) and by Luke through Nathan (Luke 3:31). The royal line from Solomon expired in Jehoiachin (Coniah, Jer. 22:24-30), and a new heir was found in Shealtiel, son of Neri, a descendant of David through Nathan (Matt. 1:12; Luke 3:27). In all probability both Joseph and Mary were descendants of David through Nathan. It may well be that Joseph and Mary were first cousins. For details, see “Genealogy of Jesus Christ,” *Smith’s Concise Dictionary of the Bible* (1865).

The progress of the Messianic office is so concisely laid out by Psalm 110:1 that we find this verse quoted or alluded to some 25 times in the New Testament. It is the classic Old Testament revelation of the future of the Messiah and therefore indispensable for inculcating the framework of the faith. In two short lines it lays out the divine plan. The One God of Israel speaks to David's lord, the coming Messiah: "The divine oracle of Yahweh to my lord [Messiah]: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'"<sup>40</sup>

This provides Peter with the information that: "Heaven must receive the Messiah until the time of the Restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21).

The anticipated subjection of the Messiah's enemies under his feet was the subject of another classic statement about the Messiah in the Psalms:

As for Me [Yahweh], I have installed My King [Messiah] upon Zion, My holy mountain...Ask of Me and I will give you the nations as your inheritance and the very ends of the earth as your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron. You shall shatter them like earthenware (Psalm 2:6, 8, 9).

The story is both coherent and clear and was critically important for Jesus and the New Testament church, who looked for the happy dénouement of the Messianic drama at the return of Jesus. As we have seen, the risen Christ makes the promise of world rulership the spur for his disciples to remain faithful to the end: "To him who overcomes and keeps my deeds to the end I will give authority over the nations" (Rev. 2:26).

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<sup>40</sup> It is on the basis of this passage that we are to understand that Jesus has been declared "lord," i.e. "Lord Messiah" (see Acts 2:34-36). Peter here lays the foundation of New Testament Christology, defining Jesus' relationship to his Father. This apostolic statement about Jesus should not be dismissed as "Jewish," nor was it superseded by a more "advanced" view when John wrote his Gospel. John, like Peter, wrote with a single purpose in mind — to prove that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God (John 20:31). Post-biblical views of Jesus disregarded these all-important facts and began to present a Jesus unlike Jesus, the Messiah — a Jesus who was less than fully human. Gentile Christology has an anti-Semitic tendency; hence the loss of the Messianism of the New Testament and the consequent confusion over the Messiah's Kingdom.

The resurrected Jesus repeats his promise under the New Covenant to confer royal office upon the Apostles. To them he had said at the last supper: “Just as my Father has granted me a Kingdom by covenant, I covenant that Kingdom to you. You will eat and drink at my table in my Kingdom, and you will sit on thrones to administer the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:29, 30).

Later in the Revelation the same privilege is extended to the church as a whole: “He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne” (Rev. 3:21).

In view of these promises of victory at the arrival of the Messiah to reign, it will not be difficult to understand the enthusiasm for the Messianic Kingdom expressed by the Apostles after they had completed six weeks of instruction about the Kingdom from the risen Jesus:

He presented himself alive, after his suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the Kingdom of God...And so when they had come together, they were asking him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the Kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:3, 6).

The question was, of course, the natural and proper one for anyone schooled by Jesus in the belief that he was the Messiah destined to introduce the Kingdom of God. Jesus did nothing at all to shake their faith in the restoration of the Kingdom. *When* the great event would occur was, however, not to be revealed: “It is not for you to know the times and seasons which the Father has fixed by His own authority” (Acts 1:7). Jesus himself had earlier confessed that he did not know the day or hour of his return (Mark 13:32). Empowerment for ministry by a divine outpouring of spirit was to occur “not many days hence” (Acts 1:5), but the coming of the *Kingdom* was to be at a time unknown (Acts 1:6, 7). These are therefore two distinct events, proving that the Kingdom of God was not inaugurated on the day of Pentecost.

The question posed by the disciples in Acts 1:6 about the restoration of the Kingdom is proof positive of the Messianic expectations instilled into them by their three and a half years’ instruction in the company of Jesus, in addition to the forty days

following the resurrection, during which Luke tells us they had been taught about “the things concerning the Kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). It is in the commentaries on Acts 1:6 that the clash between biblical Messianic Christianity and the traditional non-Messianic version of the faith shows itself most obviously. The outlook of the Apostles is unmistakable. Their question about the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel showed that they fully expected the final establishment of the theocracy on earth. As the commentaries rightly state, this would mean the spiritual renovation of mankind “which had been the highest point of prophetic and apocalyptic expectation among the Jews.”<sup>41</sup> So it ought to be among the Christians.

This commentary goes on to say that the disciples’ interest in the restoration of the Kingdom was “expressed in the language of the old Jewish Messianic hope.” But that is hardly surprising. They used the language of the Jewish Messianic hope because that was their hope! Jesus had done nothing whatever to undermine their Old Testament Messianic expectation. His ministry had been concerned with the announcement of the Messianic Kingdom, the demonstration of its power, and the inculcation of the highest spiritual character in his disciples so that they might be found fit to take part in the Kingdom when it arrived. The “Jewish Messianic Kingdom,” provided it was not divorced from the high ethical ideals required for participation in it, was none other than the hope of all the prophets, to which Jesus subscribed wholeheartedly. It is therefore misleading to speak disparagingly of the disciples’ hope for the restored Kingdom as merely “Jewish.” It is, in fact, also Christian and apostolic in the strictest sense. It is derived from Jesus himself, who had come “to confirm the promises made to the Fathers” (Rom. 15:8).

Tragically, almost all commentators stumble at biblical Christianity at this critical verse in Acts 1:6. Since they have not appreciated the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, which was the core of Jesus’ mission (Luke 4:43, etc.), they assume that the Apostles

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<sup>41</sup> *The Clarendon Bible, Acts of the Apostles*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923, p. 132.

were wrong to think of the Kingdom in Jewish Messianic terms.<sup>42</sup> They therefore find it necessary to attack the Apostles (and by implication Jesus who had taught them extensively about the Kingdom) for hanging on to a Jewish understanding of the Kingdom. What they do not see is that this Jewish view of the Kingdom is the Old Testament one which Jesus endorsed. Certainly the Kingdom of God is not just a political event unconnected with a new spiritual dimension in the heart of man. Nor are we arguing that the spirit of the Kingdom was not manifested in the ministry of Jesus; and indeed, the spiritual transformation which Christians undergo must, of course, happen now. But the stimulus for effort and endurance in the Christian race is the prospect of participation in the Messianic Kingdom of the future. This is the framework within which the whole New Testament scheme is built. For Jesus, unlike so many commentators who have misunderstood him, there is nothing “crude” or “Jewish” about a new political order on earth with Messiah enthroned as King. That is the highest ideal revealed to man, and it is nothing less than the revealed purpose of God for humanity.

The constant tendency of expositors to condemn the disciples for their interest in the restored Kingdom illustrates traditional Christianity’s hostility to Jesus’ Jewish Messianic outlook. The problem is acute, for it affects the heart of the New Testament hope as well as the Gospel of the Kingdom. A completely new orientation to the New Testament is required. Evidence for this will appear when commentators abandon their critical attitude to the Apostles in Acts 1:6 and share their vital interest in the Messianic Kingdom, which is the lifeblood of all that Jesus taught.

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<sup>42</sup> A striking example of opposition to biblical Christianity is found in Calvin’s commentary on this verse: “There are more mistakes in the Apostles’ question than there are words.” The real problem lies in Calvin’s antipathy to the Messianic Kingdom which was the heart of Jesus’ Gospel.

## 2

# The Present Age and the Age to Come

The framework within which the New Testament is set is both Jewish and Messianic. A clearly defined world view is common to all the apostolic Christians, and the same view is shared by Jesus himself. According to this view, the present system of things is thoroughly evil. Mankind is in the grip of evil cosmic forces from which it can be finally rescued only by the intervention of God Himself, who will send His Son the Messiah to defeat Satan and his demons. While it is possible for individual believers to be liberated from the pervasive tyranny of Satan even now, the whole world continues to “lie in the hands of the evil one” (1 John 5:19), who “fools all the nations” (Rev. 12:9).

For Paul the era of history in which we are living until the arrival of the Messiah in glory is the “present evil age” (Gal. 1:4), dominated by Satan (2 Cor. 4:4). The whole of creation is groaning while it awaits the revelation of the race of immortals to be manifested publicly at the resurrection (Rom. 8:22, 23). It is true that Christians can already experience something of the salvation which will come to the world when Jesus sets up his Kingdom. They can even now be “transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of God” (Col. 1:13). They are at present sons and daughters of God, born of the spirit (John 3:3, 5; James 1:18; 2 Cor. 6:18). But this must not mislead us into thinking that the Messianic Kingdom of God has actually arrived, for it cannot until the Messiah breaks through the clouds to take over the reins of world government.<sup>43</sup> Until that glorious day the Christians are to pray “Thy Kingdom come,” and, as Jesus tells us, it is when the cataclysmic events associated with the end of the age begin to

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<sup>43</sup>The inheritance of the Kingdom lies in the future according to Paul in the same letter (Col. 3:24). No text states that Christians have already “inherited the Kingdom.”

occur that the faithful may know that “the Kingdom of God is about to come” (Luke 21:31, Good News Bible).

Both Jesus and the Apostles think of the present age as subject to Satan’s dominion, and they look forward to the Coming Age of the manifested Kingdom of God consequent upon the Second Coming. It is this simple temporal framework which gives coherence to the New Testament. There is a well-defined divine program at work in the affairs of man and this enables the Christian to weather the storms of persecution and trial as he anticipates with exuberance the joys of the Coming Age of the Kingdom, when earth’s ills will be made well and the faithful will receive the prize of immortality. Not only will the earth then be rescued from the curse of Satan, but the Christian who endures to the end will be granted an active part in the restoration of society under the Messianic government which Jesus will inaugurate. In the New Testament there is a clearly defined goal to be reached at the Second Coming, and suffering, even to the point of martyrdom, can be cheerfully borne in view of the supreme reward which lies ahead.

The Christian objective is everywhere in the New Testament to gain “everlasting life” — or so our translations tell us. However, it is a commonplace of scholarship that the Greek expression in question actually means “Life in the Coming Age”<sup>44</sup> — that is, immortality and a place in the Age of the future Kingdom. By translating the Greek word “aion” (age) by “world,” the older translations helped to veil the typically Jewish contrast between “this age” and the “future age” of the Kingdom, which is fundamental to biblical Christianity.<sup>45</sup> The two ages and the familiar Christian term “everlasting life,” literally “Life in the Coming Age,” speak of the Messianism which is at the root of the whole New Testament.

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1972): “The meaning of ‘the Life of Eternity’ (Dan. 12:2) was expressed by the rabbis as ‘the Life of the Coming Age’” (p. 179).

<sup>45</sup> See Matt. 12:32; Mark 10:30; Luke 16:8; 18:30; Eph. 1:21; Heb. 6:5.

### 3

## Conflict in the Cosmos

As we have seen, Jesus traces the evil of our present system to a supremely wicked cosmic personality, Satan, the Devil. The Devil's activity, which permeates every facet of society, is furthered by a host of demonic forces who work in subtle and subversive ways to obscure the message of salvation, blinding the hearts of men and leading them away from the truth which could rescue them from Satan's deception.

The controlling influence of Satan is a fact of the universe as the writers of the New Testament understand it. And since Jesus is the Messiah who is destined to defeat Satan and his agents, it is obvious that he must carry on an unremitting struggle with the forces of evil. This the New Testament describes in detail, showing us the constant opposition with which Jesus was confronted in the form of demons, disease or hostile religious or political authorities. Looking back on the ministry of Jesus, John summarizes the Messiah's mission as a reversal of the works of the Devil: "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that he might destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8).<sup>46</sup> It is the victory of the Messiah over the arch-enemy of mankind, won at the cost of his life. Yet it is a victory which is as yet far from complete, for John can still say that the world is totally in the grip of the evil one (1 John 5:19). The good news is that "the god of this world," Satan (2 Cor. 4:4), has only a short time to carry on his nefarious work. The day of the Messiah will surely come when the Devil will be decisively put out of office (Rom. 16:20; Rev. 20:1-6). Then the Kingdom of God will prevail over all the earth.

This is the simple Messianic story which underlies the whole of the New Testament records, each book contributing in its own individual way to a development of some aspect of the Messianic

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<sup>46</sup> Peter sums up the work of Jesus in exactly the same way: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth, who went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (Acts 10:38).

drama. And drama it is indeed. For tension mounts as the world becomes more and more evil (“evil men will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived,” 2 Tim. 3:13), until finally the Messiah breaks in upon a careless and godless society and takes over the kingdoms of this world with irresistible power: “The Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess. 1:7, 8; Matt. 24:37-39).

That these are the facts of the New Testament is really unarguable. The challenging question which arises, however, is why churches calling themselves Christian seem to operate in a totally different framework, having apparently discarded the New Testament world view with its characteristic philosophy of history and its burning hope for the reappearance of the Messiah at the end of the age. The question that must be faced is why it is fair to go on calling “Christian” a system of belief which seems to have dispensed with the Messianic fabric of what Jesus, the Christ, believed and taught.

## 4

# Contemporary Theology's Anti-Messianic Tendency

Reading the works of contemporary “liberal” theologians, one is struck by the cavalier fashion in which much of the New Testament’s Messianic message is either ignored or disparaged. Referring to Jesus’ question to the Pharisees about the Messiah, “What do you think about the Christ, whose son is he?” J.A.T. Robinson points out that originally “it was a Jewish question expecting a Jewish answer,” properly rendered by the NEB, “What is your opinion about the Messiah?” But this is not a Jewish question only. If it is asked by Jesus Christ, is it not by definition a Christian question, and if it was designed to teach the Pharisees a valuable lesson, ought it not likewise to instruct us Christians in what was closest to the heart of Jesus? Robinson thinks that “Christ” is “severely conditioned historically and geographically. It is Jewish and late Jewish at that.”<sup>47</sup> Yet the Christian writer to the Hebrews traces the Messianic idea to the covenant made with David, assuming that his readers will know of the prophet Nathan’s promise to David that his illustrious descendant will inherit the throne of his father (Heb. 1:5; Psalm 2:7; 2 Sam. 7:14).

Psalm 110:1 is similarly a thoroughly Messianic passage and is a constant favorite with the New Testament writers, since it so clearly and concisely outlines the Messianic program — the session of the Messiah with his Father now, as he awaits the great moment for his return to inaugurate the Kingdom of God at the “restoration of all things” (Acts 2:34, 35; 3:21). According to the New Testament writers, God had spoken of the Christ, whom they identify with Jesus, long before his birth in Bethlehem. Moses had directly predicted the birth of the Messiah when he wrote: “The Lord will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your countrymen” (Deut. 18:15, cited in Acts 3:22, 7:37).

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<sup>47</sup> *The Human Face of God*, pp. 1, 8.

One of theology's most often used techniques for playing down the Messianism of the New Testament is the theory that the term "Christ" "has taken on currency outside Judaism only by ceasing to be a title and becoming a proper name."<sup>48</sup> Now this may be all too tragically the case if one is referring to Christianity as it developed (or degenerated) *after the New Testament period*, but to maintain that in the New Testament, "Christ" does not have its highly colored official Jewish meaning is to undermine the whole thrust of apostolic Christianity — namely that Jesus is *the* Christ expected by the Jewish Scriptures and that he acted, and is destined to act, accordingly.

Theologians even venture to tell us that "Christ" was an appellation "with which Jesus himself was unhappy,"<sup>49</sup> but this contradicts the obvious fact that Jesus saw recognition of him as *the Messiah* as the great central revelation of the faith:

He said to them, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:15-17).

What Jesus went on to criticize in Peter was not the recognition that he was the Messiah (which was a blessed revelation from God!), but Peter's unwillingness to accept that it was through suffering and death that the Messiah's glory was to be reached.

Sometimes, it seems, scholars will try to direct our attention away from the title Messiah in order to convince us that Jesus preferred to be thought of as "lord" or "Son of God": "As a theological category, to bear the weight and meaning the church saw in Jesus, 'Messiah,' with its political and eschatological overtones, was soon superseded... 'Christ' survived as a name interchangeable with 'Jesus.'"<sup>50</sup>

However, the political and eschatological associations of "Messiah" are plainly evident in what the synoptic Gospels record about Jesus. John's Gospel has as its whole purpose the presentation of Jesus as the Messiah, King of Israel (John 20:31;

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

1:41, 49). In the Revelation, the Jewish Messianism of Jesus, who speaks to the churches as Messiah in thoroughly Messianic terms, is emphatically clear, as is the whole description, based on Old Testament prophecy, of his spectacular return in power to reign on the earth (Rev. 5:10; 20:1-6; Jer. 23:5, 6, etc.).

We must recognize that Gentiles, who joined the ranks of the church in large numbers, did not easily grasp what it meant to believe in Jesus as Messiah. They were, however, ready to accept a God-figure of some kind. While the Apostles were alive, the admission of Gentiles into the church would not have been permitted without full instruction in the Messianic teachings of Jesus. However, in post-apostolic times, there occurred a gradual loss of the meaning of the word "Messiah" and thus the identity of the central figure of the faith became obscured and misunderstood.<sup>51</sup> It was this loss of the Messianism of Jesus which caused a defection from biblical Christianity, and it accounts for the strangeness of the Messianic concept to those who have not been schooled in the Christianity of the Bible. It is quite unfair, however, to attribute a loss of the Messiahship of Jesus to the New Testament Christians, for whom the understanding of Jesus as the one and only Messiah of Jewish expectation was the great central confession of the faith. Any loss of this heart of the creed was viewed as anti-Christian: "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Messiah is born of God" (1 John 5:1). "Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Messiah? This is the antichrist" (1 John 2:22).

It is clear that belief in Jesus as the promised Messiah formed the basis of the whole apostolic mission. It is the unifying theme of the whole New Testament. To admit, then, that Gentiles were

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<sup>51</sup> Ridderbos notes that Paul's use of the term "Christ" never loses its official flavor as the title of God's promised king: "However much the name Christ in the Pauline usage seems to have acquired the sense of a proper name, this does not mean that this designation has lost its official historic-Israelitic significance" (*Paul, An Outline of His Theology*, London: SPCK, 1977, p. 51). The fact is that for us as Gentiles "Christ" may seem to be a proper name. But in order to understand the New Testament, we must learn that "Christ" is a title which belongs to the promised son of David, who is destined to set up his worldwide rule in the Coming Age. The Messianic flavor of the New Testament can be recaptured if one reads the word "Messiah" in place of the word "Christ."

allowed to become members of the church without understanding the Messiahship of Jesus is simply to confess that the church lost its grip on the whole original point of Christianity's central figure.<sup>52</sup>

When theologians now tell us that "Christ" became only a meaningless surname and lost its official Hebrew meaning, they are describing a *loss* of the original faith, not a legitimate development of it. The fact is that most theologians are also not much taken with a Jesus who is the Messiah of Israel, and they therefore report without much sadness that "Messianism is dead except for the sectarian fringe."<sup>53</sup>

This may only be another way of saying that New Testament Christianity has been eclipsed, except in the minds of the minority, who still trust in Jesus as the Messiah of Old Testament prophecy and the King of the Messianic Kingdom, which still awaits its inauguration on the earth when the Messiah comes to rule. For that minority it would be hard to know what is meant by the petition "thy Kingdom come" if it were not a cry for the establishment of the Messianic government worldwide, and thus for the return of Jesus.

Since, as is widely admitted, the Kingdom of God is the controlling idea of all Jesus' teaching, we can appreciate how fatal would be the loss of the Messianic ideas associated with the Kingdom. It would inevitably lead to a reinterpretation of Jesus' teaching which strips it of its Messianic character. Can, however, such a reinterpretation really be anything other than a rewriting of Christianity in non-Messianic terms? And how could this avoid the nonsensical contradiction involved in divorcing the Messiah from his Messianic teaching? Would a Christianity emptied of its

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<sup>52</sup> J.Y. Campbell in *A Theological Word Book of the New Testament* (ed. Alan Richardson, SCM Press, 1979, p. 46) says: "In Christian usage 'Christ' first acquired a new and different meaning and became simply a name like 'Jesus' itself." He admits, however, that Jesus could not have been understood if he had given "Messiah" an entirely new meaning. Our point is simply that the loss of the meaning of the word "Messiah" meant a loss of the identity of Jesus. This made way for the substitution of an unmessianic savior who is alien to the New Testament.

<sup>53</sup> *The Human Face of God*, p. 9.

essential Messianic characteristics still amount to a faith  
recognizably apostolic?

## 5

# The Influence of Gnosticism

The cause of the radical shift away from belief in Jesus as Messiah, in the fully biblical sense of the word, is not hard to detect. It was the influence of Gnosticism which “spoke of something universal in man, and was indeed the first factor in lifting ‘the Christ’ out of the narrow confines of Jewish Messianism.”<sup>54</sup> It was against the threat of Gnosticism that the Apostles battled continuously as they sought to preserve the Jewish Messianic framework in which biblical Christianity is set.<sup>55</sup> The first target of the Gnostics was the resurrection of the dead, which for the Apostles meant the calling to life of the faithful dead to gain immortality. It was the great event associated with the return of the Messiah to set up his Kingdom. “In Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at his coming” (1 Cor. 15:22, 23).

The struggle to preserve the pure New Testament doctrine of the resurrection was unfortunately lost in the centuries following the death of the Apostles. Though certainly the church claimed that it was winning the battle, what actually happened was a partial surrender to the Gnostics. What survived as “Christian” teaching about life after death owes as much to Gnosticism as it does to the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles. According to the New Testament the dead are at present “asleep” (1 Cor. 15:18, 20; 1 Thess. 5:10) in the grave waiting to be called into life again when Jesus returns.<sup>56</sup> It is then that “all those who are in the tombs will

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<sup>54</sup> J.A.T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, p. 7.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 2:18; 1 Cor. 15:12: “Why do some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?”

<sup>56</sup> It is interesting to note the warning sounded by Justin Martyr about 150 AD: “For if you have fallen in with some who are called Christian, but who do not admit the truth of the resurrection and venture to blaspheme the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; who say that there is no resurrection of the dead but that their souls when they die are taken to heaven: Do not imagine that they are Christians” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 80).

hear his voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life..." (John 5:28, 29). The simple picture of the dead returning to life through resurrection is based on the Hebrew understanding of man as a psychosomatic unit. The whole man dies and the whole man comes to life again. Thus the prediction of resurrection in Daniel 12:2 declares that "many who are sleeping in the dust of the ground will awake, some to everlasting life" ("everlasting life" meaning literally, "Life in the Coming Age of the Kingdom").

What goes by the name of resurrection in many churches today is something rather different, bearing the marks of the Gnostic infiltration into the original faith. Popular belief, sustained by funeral sermons and indoctrination from early childhood, sees the dead as already fully alive in heaven as disembodied souls, an idea which, as so many competent scholars of all denominations have pointed out, would be both repugnant and unintelligible to the Hebrew writers of the New Testament. (Luke, the only Gentile author, was thoroughly steeped in Hebraic ways of thinking.) The aim of the traditional teaching is, no doubt, to comfort the bereaved with the belief that the departed are not really dead, but it has had the devastating effect of relegating the future resurrection of the dead (as well as the whole New Testament scheme of the future) to a redundant appendage tagged on to the end of the creed. For, as William Tyndale argued with the Roman Catholic Church, what point is there in a future resurrection of the dead if in fact they have already achieved their glory in heaven? And, we must add, what need for a Messianic Kingdom on earth when the Messiah returns? Once the Christian objective is shifted from its biblical focal point at the return of Jesus to reign, a loss of New Testament perspective is inevitable. It will not be hard to see why the New Testament scheme for the future makes so little impact on churchgoers. It simply will not fit with what they have been taught to think of as Christian teaching about life after death. A return to biblical Christianity will mean the reinstating of the pillar of Christian hope for the future — the resurrection of the dead (not just dead bodies) at the coming of Jesus. Those who preside at funeral services should consider the observations of J.A.T. Robinson:

The whole of our Western tradition has contrived to give death an altogether inflated significance. There has been a vastly exaggerated focus on death and the moment of death. It began when the pages of the New Testament were hardly dry, and it is one of the most remarkable silent revolutions in the history of Christian thought...The whole of our teaching and our hymnology has assumed that you go to heaven — or, of course, hell — when you die...This proposition is in clear contradiction with what the Bible says...The Bible nowhere says that we go to heaven when we die, nor does it ever describe death in terms of going to heaven...Wesley's words "Bid Jordan's narrow stream divide, and bring us safe to heaven" have no biblical basis.<sup>57</sup>

The recovery of apostolic Christianity will be thwarted as long as preachers and teachers fail to recognize the gulf which separates our view of the future from that of the Apostles. New Testament Christianity is set within a framework which tradition has dismantled. Rebuilding the New Testament framework begins with a restoration of the Second Advent and the ensuing Kingdom of God on earth as the focal point of all our Christian thinking. Without this clear vision of the Kingdom (which is the vision of all the prophets, as is well known), we cannot respond intelligently to what Jesus and the Apostles taught.

The task of evangelical theology must be to eliminate the pagan Greek philosophical element which has usurped the place of the original Hebraic teaching of the Bible. We must define the Kingdom of God as Jesus and the prophets defined it, and abandon our natural Gentile aversion to the Messianic hope of future peace on earth with the arrival of the Messiah in glory.

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<sup>57</sup> *On Being the Church in the World*, SCM Press, 1960, pp. 129, 130, 131.

## 6

# Demythologizing

The prospect of abandoning tradition and returning to the simple teachings of the early church ought to be an inviting and exciting one. There is a thrill to be experienced in rediscovery and a sense of common identity with the early followers of the Messiah. So far, however, theology has been trying to lead us in a different direction. What we need to do, it has been argued, is remove from the New Testament those aspects of its teaching which will not fit with our modern scientific view of the world. More specifically, the “myths” of the New Testament, such as the Virgin Birth, miracles, the literal resurrection of Jesus and the Second Coming, should be so reinterpreted in modern terms that they will not prove offensive to the scientifically sensitive.

The extent of the “demythologizing” process will vary from one writer to another, but common to all is the conviction that we, in our wisdom, simply cannot accept what Jesus and the early church believed. Almost certainly miracles will have to go, or at least many of them. The remainder can be explained “psychologically.” The resurrection, as the real reappearance of Jesus after his death, and the empty tomb will have to be questioned in order to see if a “simpler” explanation can be found. As for the Virgin Birth, that is only a way of speaking about the uniqueness of Jesus. It must not be taken as a biologically accurate account of the facts, nor should the Second Coming be thought of as a real event of the future.

It is surprising that anyone could imagine that what survives this sophisticated attack on the Christian documents is recognizably Christian, when the pillars of the New Testament faith have been removed. Perhaps it is, as Oscar Wilde said cynically, that “truth in matters of religion is simply the opinion that survives.” Truth, in reality, is what Jesus and the Apostles believed and taught.

## 7

# Evangelicalism's Gospel Without the Kingdom

The evangelical part of the churchgoing public has seen that to abandon Scripture as an authoritative and final source of the Christian faith is to open the doors to religious anarchy. However, evangelicals unwittingly accept as biblical truth a great deal that has not been carefully examined in the light of Scripture. The “sola Scriptura” slogan of the Reformation may often mean only a *traditional* explanation of the Scriptures. Luther and Calvin imposed their own dogmas on Scripture.

This is significantly true of the evangelical definition of the Gospel.<sup>58</sup> Once again it is the Messianism of the New Testament which has been abandoned. The Gospel which Jesus and the Apostles proclaimed was always *the Gospel of the Kingdom of God*.<sup>59</sup> The enormously important and almost entirely overlooked Lukan formula describing the Gospel states that belief in the Kingdom of God and the things concerning Jesus is necessary before baptism (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 28:23, 31). It was the preaching of that Gospel which Jesus saw as the essential basis of his mission (Luke 4:43). But the failure of traditional Christianity to define the Kingdom in biblical Messianic terms has led to the substitution of a partial “believe in Jesus” Gospel. The Kingdom seems to have disappeared from the Good News. The problem is that the Gospel deprived of its strong eschatological and Messianic associations is not really the Gospel as Jesus and the Apostles preached it. There is a clear difference between the traditional “departing to heaven

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<sup>58</sup> Appeal is usually made to 1 Cor. 15:1-4 without mention of the complementary evidence of Acts 8:12; 28:23, 31; 19:8; 20:25, which show that the Kingdom of God was always the center of the apostolic Gospel. In 1 Cor. 15:1-4 Paul is concerned with the vital information about the death and resurrection of Jesus which he had preached “amongst things of first importance” (*en protois*, v. 3).

<sup>59</sup> Matt. 4:23; 24:14; Luke 4:43; Acts 8:12; 28:23, 31.

when you die” and the New Testament expectation of resurrection to life in the Kingdom at the Second Coming. In the New Testament the Good News about the Kingdom of God is first put to the potential convert: “Repent and believe the Good News” (about the Kingdom of God, Mark 1:14, 15). With this message he is challenged by a statement about God’s purpose for the future of our world. God plans to send His Son to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. He has already sent him to announce that Good News and exercise the power of the Kingdom in healing and exorcism. Jesus has been temporarily transferred to the presence of his Father to act as High Priest for the church.

All of us are sinners in need of forgiveness and redemption. God’s Son, the Messiah, the prophesied Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, died for our sins. In him we may find forgiveness. The Messiah imparts righteousness also through his knowledge (Isa. 53:11).

Jesus taught that repentance and forgiveness of sin follow as a result of the acceptance of his Kingdom of God Gospel (Mark 4:11, 12). In the parable of the sower, in which Jesus gives the quintessential presentation of the Gospel of salvation, the Messiah declared that what blocks genuine repentance and consequent forgiveness is the sin of blindness or non-acceptance of Jesus’ Gospel preaching (“word of the Kingdom,” Matt. 13:19) or “words of the age to come” (John 6:68). Sin is likewise defined in John 16:9 as failure to believe in Jesus. Believing in Jesus, it must not be forgotten, means believing all that he taught as Gospel, starting with his own summary statement in Mark 1:14, 15. The New Testament from beginning to end presents faith in Jesus’ message as the indispensable condition of salvation. The same theme — namely that being made right with God (justified) depends on understanding and receiving the Gospel as Jesus preached it — is found also in Daniel 12:3: “Those who make many righteous will shine like the stars for all time.” This text strongly appealed to Jesus who quotes it in Matthew 13:43, where “the instructors, those who make many righteous” (Dan. 12:3) are “the righteous” appearing in the future Kingdom.

Initiation into the Christian community is by baptism, once the essential facts of the “Gospel of the Kingdom and the things concerning the name of Jesus” have been grasped (Acts 8:12;

28:23, 31). Following baptism as evidence of our commitment to God and His Son, we should spend the remainder of our lives growing in “grace and knowledge” (2 Pet. 3:18) in preparation for the great event of the future, the ushering in of a new order of things.

In the New Testament Gospel, the Second Coming and the ensuing Kingdom are at the heart of the message, *in addition to* the central fact of the death and resurrection of the Messiah. Not only is the Kingdom placed before the potential convert with a challenge to believe in the Good News (Mark 1:14, 15), but the would-be disciple is invited to prepare himself for an active executive part in the restoration of peace on earth when the Messiah comes to reign. At once an objective is established which gives coherence to the whole Christian venture:

“Behold, we have left everything and followed you; what then will there be for us?” And Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed me, in the Regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones to govern the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:27, 28).

When the Son of Man comes...then he will sit on his glorious throne (Matt. 25:31).

You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and just as my Father has granted me a Kingdom by covenant, I covenant that Kingdom to you. You will eat and drink at my table in my Kingdom, and you will sit on thrones to administer the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:28-30).

Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom (Luke 12:32).

When he returned after receiving the kingdom...he said to him, “Well done, good slave! Because you have been faithful in a very little thing, be in authority over ten cities” (Luke 19:15, 17).

Do you not know that the saints will govern the world?...Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God? (1 Cor. 6:2, 9).

If we endure, we will also reign with him (2 Tim. 2:12).

He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne (Rev. 3:21).

You have made them to be a kingdom of priests to our God, and they will reign on the earth (Rev. 5:10).

They came to life and reigned with the Messiah for a thousand years (Rev. 20:4).

Most of this emphasis on the future Kingdom and the believer's part in it is missing from evangelism in our time. The significant difference separating New Testament presentations of the Gospel from contemporary ones is demonstrated by the candid acknowledgment by leading evangelicals (cited earlier) that they are puzzled by the total absence of the word "kingdom" in their discussions and preaching of the Gospel. This is because they have been trapped by a gentilized version of the faith, which is essentially unmessianic and has lost its grip on the Good News about the Kingdom of God.

Evangelicals may be surprised at the suggestion that their gospel is not fully based on the Bible. They may turn to 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 to show that Paul's three-point summary of the Gospel consisted in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. This is true, as far as it goes, but they have not noted carefully that Paul preached these facts "amongst things of first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3). It was not all that Paul preached as the Gospel, for the book of Acts insists that Paul preached "the Kingdom of God and the things concerning Jesus" (Acts 28:23, 31) and, as these verses show, this message was proclaimed to Jew and Gentile alike as the message of salvation. Precisely the same formula describes the preaching of Philip in Acts 8:12: "When they believed Philip as he proclaimed the Good News about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus, they were baptized, both men and women."

It is obvious that the death and resurrection of Jesus are absolutely essential elements of the Gospel. But they are not the whole Gospel. What is misleading about contemporary evangelical tracts and systematic theology texts is that salvation is explained in terms *only* of the death and resurrection of Jesus, to the exclusion of his own preaching of the Kingdom. Evangelicalism thus

detaches Jesus from his own preaching. It severs him from the total picture of his historical preaching ministry, during which Jesus taught salvation in saving words long before he died as part of the Gospel. It is fundamentally false to say that half of the Gospel is the death of Jesus and the other half his resurrection. Such an analysis simply omits the vital saving Gospel about the Kingdom preached by the Messiah. If Jesus said one thing in summary of everything he labored to accomplish, it is that *his words* are the criterion by which our destinies are to be determined (John 12:44-50; Matt. 7:21-27).

In Mark 8:35-38, Jesus presents faith and confidence in his Gospel and words as the sole criterion for salvation. Salvation is indeed by faith, but it must be faith in everything Jesus declared as the Gospel. The Messiah repeatedly urged his audience to “hear” *what he had to say*, not merely to watch him die.

Clearly the Kingdom of God was the *first* item on the agenda in apostolic presentations of the Gospel. This is hardly surprising, since Jesus had always proclaimed the Gospel of the Kingdom — and this was long before anything at all was said about his death for our sins, which the disciples did not yet understand! (Luke 18:31-34). It is immensely instructive to note that the subject matter of the Kingdom cannot originally have included the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Apostles had proclaimed the Gospel of the Kingdom before they knew anything about the cross. This is why Luke in Acts is careful to tell us that the apostolic proclamation *after the resurrection* maintained its primary emphasis on the Kingdom of God, and *added* the new information about the death of Jesus as “the things concerning his name” (Acts 8:12; 28:23, 31). It is crucially important to observe that Paul could describe his whole ministry as “preaching the Kingdom” (Acts 20:25), just as Jesus had seen the Gospel of the Kingdom as the foundation of his mission (Luke 4:43). But could contemporary evangelicals demonstrate their faithfulness to apostolic practice when, at an international conference on evangelism, they admit

that the Kingdom of God “is not our language”?<sup>60</sup> If the Kingdom is not their language, they are not preaching the whole Gospel!

The absence of the Kingdom from contemporary statements of the Gospel is a serious defect which can only be rectified by rediscovering the Messianic message of God's future reign on earth in the persons of the Messiah and his followers. Not only the Kingdom, but the Messiahship of Jesus must be put back into the center of the Christian proclamation. The confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi must not be allowed to suffer the slightest alteration, for it is the rock foundation of the faith; nor must the title “Son of God” be removed from its biblical context, lest it take on an unbiblical meaning. In Scripture it is plainly and simply an extension of the Messianic title based on Psalm 2:7 and the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7:14. To invest someone with the title “Son of God” in the Bible is equivalent to hailing him as Messiah, a unique and specially anointed representative of God. Evangelicals must close the gap that appeared in post-biblical times between the two titles, Christ and Son of God, under the influence of unmessianic Christianity. A stimulus to a return to the right understanding of the Son of God is given in Luke 1:35: The Son of God comes into being by miraculous generation in Mary's womb.

It has been most wisely said that “to worship Christ with the wrong beliefs about him is to worship a false Christ, by whatever name we call him; for we, in so doing, falsely imagine him to be other than he is and other than he is revealed in Scripture to be.”<sup>61</sup> It must be clear that a Gospel deprived of its central theme, the Kingdom (as it obviously is in contemporary evangelism), and a Jesus who is not perfectly matched with the Messiah of Scripture, both as to his identity and his role, threaten the whole fabric of the New Testament faith. Received systems of belief and preaching must therefore be subjected to critical scrutiny by those seeking to worship God, through His Son the Messiah, in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

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<sup>60</sup> Michael Green, at the Lausanne International Conference on World Evangelization, 1974.

<sup>61</sup> R.A. Cole, *Tyndale N.T. Commentary on Mark*, Intersity Press, 1961, p. 199.

Our point has been made forcefully by three leading biblical experts. These writers call for a return to the Kingdom of God as the organizing center of all evangelism:

Tom Wright, one of the world's most famous current writers on Christianity, says:

The church's use of the Gospels has given scant attention to what the Gospels themselves are saying about the actual events of Jesus' life and *his Kingdom proclamation* [Gospel of salvation]...Therefore the church is in effect sitting on but paying no attention to a central part of its own tradition that might, perhaps, revitalize or reform the church significantly were it to be investigated...This must involve understanding what the Gospels are saying about Jesus *within the world of first-century Judaism*, not within the imagination of subsequent piety (or impiety)...To content oneself with a non-historical Christ of faith seems to me...demonstrably false to New Testament Christianity.<sup>62</sup>

Dr. Charles Taber, Professor Emeritus of World Mission, Emmanuel School of Evangelism, Tennessee, wrote in a letter to *Christianity Today*:

I read with the greatest interest the nine statements in *Christianity Today* attempting to answer the question, "What is the Good News?" I am amazed and dismayed to find not even a passing mention of the theme which was the core of Jesus' Gospel in three of the four accounts: *The Kingdom of God*. Every one of these statements reflects the individualistic reduction of the Gospel that plagues American evangelicalism. In addition to being biblical, founding one's understanding of the Gospel on the Kingdom of God bypasses two false dilemmas that have needlessly troubled theologians for several centuries: 1) the either-or between individual and systematic salvation, and 2) the either-or between grace and works. On the one hand God intends to rescue the entire cosmos from the bondage to decay; on the other hand how can one claim to be saved who does not make every effort to do God's will?

Gary Burge, quoted in the *NIV Application Commentary* ("Revisioning Evangelical Theology"), shares this concern for the absence of Jesus' own Gospel from present offers of salvation:

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<sup>62</sup> *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*, p. 251.

“Stanley Grenz has reviewed the failed attempts of evangelical theology to fire the imagination of the modern world. He argues for the Kingdom of God as the new organizing center of what we say and do.”

This comment may well be just the answer needed to the dismally disappointing current attempts to “grow” churches. The facts are that new converts are seldom made. “Church growth,” so-called, is largely the movement from one church to another of those already claiming to be believers.

Lest we be charged with repetition of our basic thesis we will shelter under the admonition of Winston Churchill whose advice in the field of effective communication was as follows: “If you have an important point to make, don’t try to be subtle or clever. Use a pile driver. Hit the point once. Then come back and hit it again. Then hit it a third time — a tremendous whack.”

## 8

# Accommodation to Mystery Religion

Historians tell us that there are striking points of similarity between Christianity and pagan mystery cults: “For one thing all of them had some form of initiation ceremony. In the case of Mithraism this was exactly the same as Christianity, namely baptism.”<sup>63</sup>

In the cult of Attis, a young lover of Cybele, there was a celebration of the death of the savior (Attis) and of his resurrection three days later. These are not the only points of contact between the pagan and the traditional Christian calendars:

If Easter owes much to Cybele, Christmas is largely derived from Mithras (plus the old Roman festival of the Saturnalia, a jolly occasion on which gifts were exchanged). Mithras, associated as he was with the sun, gave Christianity December 25<sup>th</sup> as the date for Christmas...What is more, Mithras, like Jesus, was believed to have had a miraculous birth and to have attracted, as an infant, the attention of the neighboring shepherds. In addition, Mithraism, like Christianity, had a sacramental meal as part of its ceremonial. But perhaps the most important element common to Christianity and the pagan mystery cults was the concept of salvation. In one sense or another, Isis, Cybele, and Mithras were all seen as saviors.<sup>64</sup>

It is not hard to see how Christianity and the mystery cults could have become confused in the minds of improperly instructed Gentile believers. The tendency to reinterpret the Messiah in Gentile terms and the tell-tale signs of Gnosticism in traditional Christianity suggest that a significant accommodation to paganism has taken place. The opinion of one widely recognized Lutheran scholar should be carefully noted:

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<sup>63</sup> Michael Arnheim, *Is Christianity True?* London: Duckworth, 1984, p. 127.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

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. 15; Phil. 3:20ff). 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 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.<sup>65</sup>

Norman H. Snaith, M.A., D.D., makes a significant contribution to our discussion. He sounds a warning note that all is not well with “official” Christianity when he says:

The whole Bible, the New Testament as well as the Old Testament, is based on the Hebrew attitude and approach. We are of the firm opinion that this ought to be recognized on all hands to a greater extent. It is clear to us...that there is often *a great difference between Christian theology and biblical theology*. Throughout the centuries the Bible has been interpreted in a Greek context, and even the New Testament has been interpreted on the basis of Plato and Aristotle...Our position is that the reinterpretation of biblical theology in terms of the ideas of Greek philosophers has been both widespread throughout the centuries and everywhere destructive to the essence of the Christian faith...If these judgments are sound, and we believe that they are sound, then *neither Catholic nor Protestant theology is based on biblical theology*. In each case we have a domination of Christian theology by Greek thought.<sup>66</sup>

In addition, the whole vexed question now being so widely discussed about the relation of Jesus to the One God of strict biblical monotheism needs to be examined by seekers after the

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<sup>65</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966, pp. 413, 414, emphasis added.

<sup>66</sup> *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, New York: Schocken, 1964, pp. 185, 187, 188, emphasis added.

purity of apostolic faith. It is remarkable that for Paul (as for Jesus) there was no theoretical difficulty for monotheism about Jesus being the Son of God, the Messiah. Only when a subtly different claim that he was “God the Son” was introduced did the whole Trinitarian question arise. The current illuminating discussion about the presence or absence of the developed doctrine of the incarnation of the second member of a Triune God in Scripture should be carefully investigated by evangelicals before they jump to hasty conclusions about the biblical basis of traditional creeds.<sup>67</sup>

For those not wishing to tackle the subject in so much detail, it will be sufficient to examine the illuminating Jewish-Christian creed of Jesus recorded in Mark 12:28-34 as well as Paul’s classic creedal statement about what Christians believe in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6. His definition of the One God as distinct from Jesus, the one Lord Messiah, should be noted carefully: “There is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods in heaven and on earth (as indeed there are many gods and many lords), yet for us there is but one God, the Father...and one Lord Jesus Messiah.”

At the close of his ministry Paul again states the apostolic creed: “There is one God, and one mediator between God and man, the man Messiah Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).

These revealing verses show that Paul never for an instant abandoned the strict monotheism of the Jewish heritage he shared with Jesus. The One God of Christian monotheism is the *Father*. This is unitary, not Trinitarian monotheism, as so many contemporary scholars recognize; and John is as undeviating a witness to this form of monotheism as any New Testament writer (John 5:44; 17:3). His one purpose is to make us believe in Jesus as *Messiah* (John 20:31).

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<sup>67</sup> See, for example, *Christology in the Making* by James Dunn (Eerdmans, 1996); *The Human Face of God* by J.A.T. Robinson (SCM Press, 1973), especially chapter 5; *God as Spirit* by Geoffrey Lampe (SCM Press, 1977), chapter 5; and especially *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity* by James P. Mackey (SCM Press, 1983), chapter 6: “The Problem of the Pre-existence of the Son.”

## 9

# A Call for a Return to New Testament Christianity

The New Testament presents us with an essentially simple doctrine of the church. It is the continuation of the faithful congregation of Israel, now composed of Jew and Gentile, and enjoying equal status as part of the spiritual “Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16; Phil. 3:3). The citizens of this community are to be, in the words of Jesus, “*not part of this world*” (John 15:19). They are to be separate and different from the world as ambassadors of the Kingdom of God (2 Cor. 5:20) and thus manifest the holiness of the God who inspires them through His spirit.

One of the most perplexing and troubling aspects of traditional Christianity is its failure to put into practice the ideals of conduct demanded by Jesus of his followers. These are laid out with particular clarity in the Sermon on the Mount, where the requirements of discipleship are taught. Christians are commanded to love their opponents and not to resist evil persons. In so doing they are to conform to a new standard: that of loving their enemies (Matt. 5:38-48). In the past, Jesus pointed out, it was customary to hate the national enemies of Israel (it had never been permissible to hate a fellow Israelite enemy). Under the Christian ethic, however, enemies of all sorts are to be loved and not resisted. The incompatibility of this teaching with participation in the war machine is obvious. Even the traditional just war theory, if it could be reconciled with Scripture, is utterly inadequate under modern conditions where nuclear weapons threaten the lives of combatants and non-combatants alike, including fellow believers.

As a primary mark of Christianity the whole body of Christians is to be recognized by the world as disciples of Jesus by the love which unites them: “By this will all men recognize you, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

In this community bonded by love, there is to be “no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and

uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman” (Col. 3:11) and, we might add, “American, Russian and French Christian,” but Christ is all in all. The first obvious implication of this teaching is that Christians cannot possibly be involved in the slaughter of their brethren in other lands, and it is therefore imperative for them to separate themselves from the use of violence which inevitably renders them guilty of the blood of their fellow Christians in other nations, as well as their enemies. It really is outrageous that Christians can think that they can go on contemplating the mass destruction of their spiritual brethren, as for example happened in World War II when countless Lutheran Christians in Germany and British Christians in England took each others’ lives.<sup>68</sup> The only possible course consistent with Jesus’ instructions is to “come out and be separate” and maintain the bond of love by which “all men will recognize you as my disciples.”

In maintaining the New Testament example of separation from the state, Christians will be true to their status as ambassadors resident in a “foreign” and hostile world, and they will witness as a colony of the Kingdom of God to the worldwide peace which will come to the earth when Jesus returns to reign.

The return of Christians to a status of “resident aliens” in an evil world will reflect the great biblical truth that believers are the true “seed of Abraham” (Gal. 3:29). To Abraham were promised both the land and the distinguished seed, who is Christ (Gal. 3:16). The single seed, the Messiah, incorporates all true believers. Thus the promise of the land in perpetuity (Gen. 13:15; 17:8),

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<sup>68</sup> One who saw the inconsistency of Christians taking each others’ lives was an Archdeacon in the Church of England: “Within the Christian fellowship each is to be linked to each other by a love like that of Christ for each. That is the new commandment; and obedience to it is to be evidence to the world of true discipleship...Such is the quality of love designed for the unity of his church. But can anything conflict more completely with such an ideal than that Christians should go to war against Christians?...Can anyone outside a madhouse suggest that when, for example, British and American Christians accepted responsibility for dropping the atomic bomb which killed and maimed in body and soul their fellow Christians in Nagasaki, such an act could be ‘evidence’ to the world that within the Christian fellowship they were linked by a love like that of Christ for each other?” (Percy Harthill, *War, Communism and the Christian Faith*, James Clarke and Co., n.d., pp. 47-49).

Abraham's inheritance, is also the inheritance of Christ and the saints: "Blessed are the meek, for they will have the land/earth as their inheritance" (Matt. 5:5). The land promise, which runs like a golden thread through the Old Testament, comes into the New Testament as the promised inheritance of the future Kingdom of God on earth or in the land (cp. Rev. 5:10; Ps. 37:11).

The patriarchs lived as "aliens" in the land of the promise (Heb. 11:9) and they died without receiving the promised land (Heb. 11:13, 39). It is only by resurrection at the return of Christ that the faithful of all the ages, those who are "of the faith of Abraham" (Rom. 4:16), will attain to the promised inheritance of the earth, i.e., the Kingdom of God.

# 10

## Tradition — The Great Barrier to Progress

The difficulty in gaining acceptance for what we are proposing lies not in the complexity of the subjects under discussion but in the tenacity with which “the way we have always believed” grips the minds of sincere churchgoers. Biblical Christianity, which cannot flourish unless it is accepted with the mind “of a little child,” is nothing more than belief in, and surrender to, the Father as “the only true God” (John 17:3), and to Jesus as Messiah, who preached the saving Gospel of the Kingdom, died for the sins of the world and is now High Priest over his people drawn from every nation. He will return to gather his followers into the Kingdom to be inaugurated on the earth. It is the long-standing “demessianized” version of the faith, widely and uncritically accepted, which makes it hard for us to relinquish cherished understandings. But for evangelicals especially there should be a great appeal in the challenge to return to the Bible and begin to proclaim, first and foremost, “the Gospel of the *Kingdom* and the things concerning the Name of Jesus” (Acts 8:12; 28:23, 31; Luke 4:43).

The thesis underlying this challenge to surrender unconditionally to the apostolic teachings of the Bible is that churchgoers have unwittingly taken on board a great measure of post-biblical Greek theology which is foreign to and incompatible with what the Apostles taught. This complaint is certainly not original, but it has so far not gained a wide hearing. A celebrated Oxford scholar wrote in 1889:

I venture to claim to have shown that a large part of what are sometimes called Christian doctrines, and many usages which have prevailed and continue to prevail in the Christian church are in reality Greek theories and Greek usages changed in form and color by the influence of primitive Christianity, but *in their essence Greek still*...The question which forces itself upon our

attention as the phenomena pass before us in review is the question of the relation of these Greek elements to the nature of Christianity itself. The question is vital; its importance can hardly be overestimated.<sup>69</sup>

If, as we have contended, the Greek mind has distorted our understanding of the meaning of “Christ” and of his Gospel of the Kingdom, nothing could exceed in importance the need for a thorough reexamination, at the personal, family and church levels, of these central building blocks of the faith. As a stimulus to weeding out from our belief systems what is not genuinely Christian, we should remember also the warning of a British theologian who wrote:

When the Greek mind and the Roman mind in turn, instead of the Hebrew mind, came to dominate the church’s outlook, there occurred a disaster from which we have never recovered, either in practice or in doctrine. If today a great age of evangelization is to dawn, we need the Jews again.<sup>70</sup>

Quite specifically, we need the Jew Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and Savior of the world who, we suspect, has been overshadowed or even replaced by a Gentile “Jesus.”

The same point is made by Olga Levertoff:

The church must retrace her steps to find again the prophetic spirit of the revolutionary leaders of ancient Israel. She must be prepared to break with much that time has hallowed or privilege made dear. “Back to the first-century church” must be her slogan — which practically means back to Jewish Christianity.<sup>71</sup>

This does not, of course, mean back to Judaism, but to the genuine Christianity of Jesus and Paul, a Christianity centered in belief in Jesus as the Lord Messiah of Hebrew expectation, and in the Messianic Kingdom which he and his followers with him will administer on earth when he comes again.

Throughout the New Testament it is assumed that Christians will become familiar with the Old Testament, especially the

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<sup>69</sup> Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity*, Peabody, MA: Henderson, 1995, pp. 350-1 .

<sup>70</sup> Canon H. Goudge in *Collected Essays on Judaism and Christianity*, Shears and Sons, 1939.

<sup>71</sup> *The Jews in a Christian Social Order*, New York: Macmillan, 1942.

message and predictions of the prophets, and that its authority as well as that of Jesus and the Apostles will be unquestioned. The widespread defection from this Christian perspective is rapidly leading to spiritual anarchy.

Though the New Testament is written in the Greek language, its controlling ideas are Hebrew, derived from the Old Testament, and its grand central theme is the Good News about the Kingdom of God to be realized through the work of Jesus, the promised Messiah. Unless these principles are basic to a system of theology, that theology can make no claim to be apostolic. Once the Kingdom of God is “reinterpreted” in terms of “the social gospel,” or merely a kingdom “in the heart,” or “heaven” at death, and its apocalyptic association with a future crisis in history is discarded, we have no right to identify it with the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles. In other words, unless the Second Coming of Jesus and the subsequent Kingdom on earth remain as central as his resurrection in Christian thinking, we must admit to a loss of an essential element of the Messianic program. The hope for the return of Messiah in history to renew the world must be reinstated and maintained against all the varied and essentially Gnostic efforts to remove it or empty it of its biblical meaning. As is well known, every imaginable device has been employed by theologians to eliminate the Second Coming and the Kingdom which follows. It has been dismissed as “poetry,” or the texts which describe it in detail are dissolved into thin air with protests that they cannot be taken literally. This is a form of theological cowardice. It is time to stop retreating from the “concrete” Messianic sayings of Jesus and embrace them, thankful for the hope they offer for peace on earth.

Evasive treatment of plain language amounts only to refusal to hear “the word of God,” the Gospel (Luke 5:1; 8:11) and the seed of the new birth (Matt. 13:19; 1 Pet. 1:23-25). We dare not rewrite the Christian faith to suit ourselves. What stands written as “the faith once and for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) contains the record not only of the unique *origin* of the Son of God (Matt. 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35; Acts 13:33) and his return to life after death, but also the promise of our resurrection destined to occur when Jesus returns to inaugurate a new era of history from which Satan will be

banished. Could anything be more relevant to our sin-sick world? And what greater and yet more humbling privilege could be conceived than for Christians to have a part in the reorganization of mankind in the New Society of the coming Kingdom of God on earth?

# 11

## Prediction in the New Testament

No aspect of the New Testament has suffered more at the hands of criticism than that which deals with predictions about the future. The confusion and conflict which have resulted are to be found in standard commentaries. In Matthew 24 (parallel to Mark 13 and Luke 21) Jesus gave an essentially straightforward account of events which will lead up to his return to inaugurate the Kingdom. It is an account, as Jesus says, grounded in the predictive revelations granted to Daniel, and it is a coherent description of the final stages of the present evil age, just before Jesus' reappearance. Evidently Jesus believed that the book of Daniel contained information about the distant future, and he therefore instructed his followers to consult the words of Daniel in order to grasp the meaning of his own view of the future: "When you see the Desolating Horror, spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place<sup>72</sup> (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains" (Matt. 24:15, 16).

The very notion of prediction seems to be unacceptable to much of scholarship.<sup>73</sup> Phrases such as "morbid curiosity," using

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<sup>72</sup>Mark (13:14) records the saying as "standing where *he* ought not to," pointing to a personal antichrist.

<sup>73</sup>Cp. Joyce Baldwin's observation that "with regard to prophecy as foretelling, the church has lost its nerve. An earthbound, rationalistic humanism has so invaded Christian thinking as to tinge with faint ridicule all claims to see in the Bible anything more than the vaguest reference to future events" (*Tyndale Commentary on Daniel*, Intersity Press, 1978, pp. 184, 185). It is hard to see how there can be progress in understanding the predictive passages of the Old Testament when commentators refuse to follow Paul's clear application of Dan. 11:36 to a future antichrist in 2 Thess. 2:4. Norman Porteous' commentary on Daniel, in the Old Testament Library series (SCM Press, 1965, p. 169), declares that "it is theologically valueless to see antichrist in Dan. 11:36." But Paul evidently did. And Jesus saw an end-of-the-age event in Dan. 11:31 (Matt. 24:15). It is a tragedy when scholars view themselves as wiser than Jesus and Paul.

the Bible as a “horoscope” to predict the future, are thrown at anyone who would be so naive as to think that Jesus could have spoken of events at least 1900 years ahead of his day. It might be conceded that he foresaw the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (although the disciples may have written the “prophecy” after the event!), but it seems inconceivable to the commentators that Jesus could know the future beyond the first century. The whole study of prophecy has been blighted by the tendency of commentators to force biblical predictions into already fulfilled history rather than to allow that they are as yet unfulfilled.

Why should not God grant the secrets of the future to His Son, and through him to his faithful church? It is obvious that Jesus intended his followers to gain insight into future events, since he responded directly to their question about the sign of his coming and the end of the age (Matt. 24:3). Later in the same discourse he says plainly: “Behold, I have told you in advance” (Matt. 24:25).

The reply which Jesus gave assumes that the reader will know of Daniel’s forecast about the final enemy of Christianity — the Antichrist — who will set himself up as a divine authority in Jerusalem. His destruction will come at the hands of the returning Messiah. The scheme for the future described by Jesus amounts to a simple program. There will be an “Abomination of Desolation” (Mark’s masculine participle “standing” points to a human being, Mark 13:14), previously foreseen by Daniel (Matt. 24:15), standing in the Holy Place in Jerusalem. This is to be the cue for the Christians living in Judea to “flee to the mountains,” because there will follow a time of unparalleled suffering, described by Jesus as “great tribulation” (Matt. 24:21). Jesus gives specific details and warnings in connection with the flight of the church to avoid the terrible time of distress caused by the appearance of “the Abomination of Desolation.”

*Immediately* after this time of extreme trouble (Matt. 24:29), cosmic disturbances will occur in the sky, and then the Messiah will appear in the clouds and gather his chosen people into the Kingdom of God (Matt. 24:30, 31). As Luke puts it, “When you see [the cataclysmic events leading to the Second Coming], recognize that the Kingdom of God is near” (Luke 21:31). This critically important text supplies us with one of numerous proofs of

the arrival of the Kingdom of God as an event *following* the future coming of Jesus. It should be obvious that Jesus was not talking about events in AD 70, immediately after which no Second Coming occurred!

The prophetic discourse of Jesus is, as he says, built on revelations granted in the sixth century BC to Daniel. When all the data is assembled, together with the much-neglected parallel material from Isaiah, it forms a unified whole and gives a coherent picture of the future in the Middle East just prior to the Second Coming. The same subject is taken up by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2, where he reinforces, against the menace of contradictory schemes designed to confuse the church, the sequence of events given by Jesus. Paul foresees a defection from God — an apostasy — leading to the arrival and reign of the Antichrist, which is followed by the appearance of Christ in glory to destroy the final enemy, gather the faithful and establish the Kingdom (see 2 Thess. 2:1-12).

The material preserved for us in Jesus' Olivet discourse is all part and parcel of his Messianic outlook. It cannot be divorced from the rest of his teaching without severe distortion of his (Christian) Jewish belief which has its roots in the Old Testament. This includes understanding Daniel as the medium of divine revelation concerning the future just preceding the Second Coming.<sup>74</sup> The book of Daniel is largely a description of the final Antichrist, of whom Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BC was merely a shadow. Jesus evidently believed, as his followers also must, that the Old Testament "antichrist," Antiochus, provided the "typical" groundwork for the even more sinister figure who will one day menace the saints and pose as a Messianic pretender. Like Jesus, Paul took all this with the utmost seriousness and spoke of it constantly to the churches ("Don't you remember that while I was still with you I used to tell you these things?" 2 Thess. 2:5).

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<sup>74</sup> The importance of understanding the message of the book of Daniel as a basis for understanding the teaching of Jesus can hardly be exaggerated. "Daniel among all the books of the Old Testament is...of the highest significance for the New Testament as a whole" (H.C. Kee, *The Community of the New Age*, Mercer University Press, 1983, p. 45).

Paul saw in the Antichrist, the Man of Sin, a ghastly caricature and parody of the returning Messiah himself. In the Apostle's view the only insurance against being duped by the fake Messiah is to be thoroughly grounded in the Truth of the divine revelation in Jesus and the Scriptures (2 Thess. 2:7-10). The Apostle goes so far as to say that the Antichrist will himself have a spectacular arrival, a "parousia" (2 Thess. 2:9). Such will be the subtlety of Satan's efforts to deceive. In some dazzling way this pseudo Second Coming will ape the glorious revelation of the Messiah himself. It will be a case of opposition by imitation, leading to tragedy for those not able to discern the true from the false (2 Thess. 2:10-12).

All this is basic to the New Testament outlook on the future, but it has been quite unreasonably discarded by the churches in their general neglect of New Testament Messianism. The recovery of the essential Christian teaching about the future, found throughout the New Testament, would do much to rekindle interest in biblical Christianity.

It is no exaggeration to say that the subject of Antichrist is of the utmost importance to Jesus, Paul and John, who with Luke are the principal witnesses to the apostolic faith. As we have seen, Jesus referred his disciples to the predictions of Daniel who, in chapters 7, 8, 9, 11, and 12, foresaw the rise and reign of an awful tyrant, an arch-persecutor of the faithful whose dreadful career would dominate a period of seven years (the final "heptad" of Gabriel's revelation of the seventy "heptads," Dan. 9:24-27), just preceding the arrival of Jesus in glory. That Jesus understood this final seven-year period to be future is shown by his placing Daniel's "Abomination," who is active during the seven years (Dan. 9:26, 27), in the future *immediately* before the Second Coming (Matt. 24:15, 29, 30).

The information to which Jesus refers us is found in Daniel 8:13; 9:26, 27; 11:31; 12:11 and the surrounding contexts. In these verses an abominable figure, who carries on a war of devastation and interferes with a restored temple economy, comes to his end in a "flood" (Dan. 9:26; 11:45) or cataclysm precipitated by the arrival of Jesus "in flaming fire dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and do not obey the Gospel" (2 Thess. 1:7, 8). The event corresponds to Paul's description of the Antichrist's

doom in 2 Thessalonians 2:8. From the moment the abominable tyrant is established in the holy place, there will elapse a period of about 3½ years (Dan. 12:7, 11), the second half of the final heptad of years announced by Gabriel in Daniel 9:26, 27. The book of Revelation associates the same 3½-year period with the eschatological reign of “the Beast” (Rev. 13:5; cp. 11:2, 3; 12:6, 14).

An examination of the relevant passages in Daniel to which we are directed by Jesus in Matthew 24:15 shows that a “despicable person” (Dan. 11:21ff) will arise in the Middle East, perhaps in the area of Syria or Iraq (described as an Assyrian in Isa. 11:4; cp. 2 Thess. 2:8; Micah 5:6; Isa. 30:27-33), ingratiate himself with Israel, but later turn upon them and the Christians, making a final effort to establish himself in power in Jerusalem. Jesus refers quite specifically to this sequence of events, which will *immediately precede* his return (Matt. 24:29), and in Daniel’s account *immediately precede* the resurrection of the faithful dead (Dan. 12:1, 2). The material given us by Daniel therefore corresponds with Jesus’ own development of it. Both he and Daniel describe a period of unprecedented tribulation (Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21) immediately prior to the end of the age. The end is marked (as everywhere else in Scripture) by the resurrection of the dead (Dan. 12:2) and by the return of Jesus (Matt. 24:30, 31). The scheme revealed by Jesus harmonizes with the clear statement of Paul about the moment when the faithful dead will be “made alive,” implying, of course, that they are dead until that future moment (1 Cor. 15:22). This simple plan for resurrecting the dead at the future coming of Jesus cannot be harmonized with traditional views of the dead being *already* alive with him in heaven. It is only by *resurrection* at the Parousia that the saints can come into the presence of Jesus (1 Thess. 4:17; 5:10).

In the book of Revelation, the prophecies of Daniel and Jesus are further developed. The critical final 3½-year period of Antichrist’s reign, based on Daniel 9:26, 27; 7:25; 12:7, 11, is again seen by Jesus as future (Rev. 13:5) and it comes to an end when, with the Messiah’s arrival, “the kingdoms of the world have become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15). There then follows the long-

anticipated reign of Messiah and his saints, who “come to life and reign as kings with the Messiah” (Rev. 20:4).

The methods by which commentators have attempted to do away with this future Messianic Kingdom are among the most devastating in the whole history of mishandling the words of Scripture. The resurrection of previously beheaded saints to reign with Jesus (Rev. 20:4) can, of course, refer only to a real resurrection from the dead. It certainly cannot be a description of Christian conversion now! Yet this has been the traditional view since Augustine,<sup>75</sup> and it is a witness to the whole anti-Messianic tendency of traditional Christianity.

The “first resurrection” (Rev. 20:5), describing the blessedness of those who come to life in order to be “priests of God and the Messiah and reign with him for a thousand years” (Rev. 20:6), follows the Second Coming seen by John in Revelation. The order of events is just what we would expect from the sequence given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:22, 23. After being made alive by resurrection, the faithful embark on their reign with the Messiah, exactly as Jesus had promised in the texts we have already discussed.<sup>76</sup>

A careful collation of the extensive material provided by the prophecies of Daniel, Isaiah, Paul and Jesus himself in the Gospel and Revelation provides us with a rather detailed picture of events in the region of Israel leading to the return of the Messiah. A much neglected feature of Paul’s account of the Antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2 is his quotation from Isaiah 11:4. The reference there is to an end-time Assyrian, further described in Isaiah 30:27-32:4 in a Messianic setting, “whom the Lord Jesus will slay with the breath of his mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of his coming” (2 Thess. 2:8). The final “king of the North” (Dan. 11), apparently the ruler of Assyria,<sup>77</sup> is to be found in the territory formerly held by the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. It is from that quarter that Scripture seems to expect the Antichrist to arise; and it is possible that the whole of Daniel 11, from verse 5

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<sup>75</sup>This view is known as amillennialism.

<sup>76</sup>Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30; Rev. 2:26; 3:21; 5:10.

<sup>77</sup>In Scripture “the King of Assyria” may designate a Median ruler (see Ezra 6:22). The Medes saw themselves as successors to the Assyrians.

onwards, is a prediction of events yet future to our time. As history that passage is sometimes both sketchy and erratic and, despite some parallels, does not correspond exactly with the succession of Syrian kings who lived in the fourth to the second century BC. The narrative from Daniel 11:5 to Daniel 12:3 reads as a connected whole, much of which corresponds to nothing in history, while the remainder has been only imperfectly fulfilled. The great revelation granted to Daniel in chapters 10-12 to show him “what will happen to your people at the end of the days [i.e., the days just preceding the Messianic Kingdom], for the vision pertains to the days yet future” (10:14) should be treasured by all those who take seriously Jesus’ admonition to read and understand the book of Daniel. (See Dan. 10:14 and Jesus’ instructions in Matt. 24:15.)

The prophecy is clearly granted to the church as a comfort in the difficult last days before Messiah’s return. Jesus’ reference to the Abomination of Desolation in Daniel 9:27; 11:31; and 12:11 (cp. 8:13) directs our attention to the whole context in which these verses are found. This is exactly the New Testament method. “When the New Testament quotes a brief Old Testament passage, it often applies implicitly to the entire context of the quotation.”<sup>78</sup>

“Scholarship” has been unwilling to follow Jesus or Paul closely when it comes to their preoccupation with the (to them) distant future preceding the Second Coming. However, there is no logical reason to treat any less seriously the forecast of future events given by Jesus in Matthew 24 than one would, for example, the Sermon on the Mount. “Theology” seems to have done its best to divorce Jesus from what is viewed as the “unsuitable” teaching contained in the Olivet discourse. The New Testament, however, presents the Son of God as no less authoritative in his prediction of the future than in his radical ethical demands. All is a reflection of the Messiah’s Messianic outlook and belief. Every bit of the New Testament data is required in order to give us a rounded picture of the Jesus of history and faith.

Churches, therefore, cannot claim to represent the mind of Jesus unless they convey to their members and the world the sum

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<sup>78</sup> D.A. Carson, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary on Matthew*, Zondervan, 1984, p. 205.

of all that Jesus taught.<sup>79</sup> It is clear that traditional Christians have simply neglected or suppressed major parts of this teaching.<sup>80</sup> In their selective treatment of the records, churches appear to endorse only what tradition will permit. Much of the rest of what Jesus taught has been pushed aside as “Jewish” or “unspiritual.” There is a persistent anti-Semitic streak in traditional theology. It is Jesus *Christ’s* (and therefore by definition Christian) Messianism which has suffered so disastrously from uncomprehending Gentile commentary.

This unfortunate anti-Messianic tendency which tries to tame the Messianism of the New Testament and the Old Testament prophets and make it more respectable, “religious” and “spiritual” originates in the failure of the Protestant reformers to believe the words of Jesus, especially in the book of Revelation.

Luther in the preface to his translation of the New Testament (1522) expressed a strong aversion to the book of Revelation, declaring that to him it had every mark of being neither apostolic nor prophetic...and he cannot see that it was the work of the Holy Spirit. Moreover he does not like the commands and threats which the writer makes about his book (22:18, 19), and the promise of blessedness to those who keep what is in it (1:3; 22:7), when no one knows what that is...Moreover, many

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<sup>79</sup> James Barr observes that “traditional orthodoxy is a monumental example of the ‘picking and choosing’ that it deprecates in others. Actually ‘liberal’ theology in its emphasis on (say) the Kingdom of God was following the canonical proportions of the Gospels much more faithfully” (*Holy Scripture, Canon Authority, Criticism*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983, p. 40). Unfortunately the “liberals” understood the Kingdom of God quite differently from Jesus. Bultmann dismissed the entire New Testament hope for the future, canceling the future Kingdom of God with a single stroke: “We can no longer look for the return of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven, or hope that the faithful will meet him in the air” (*Kerygma and Myth*, New York: Harper and Row, 1961, p. 4).

<sup>80</sup> In 1926, William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, noted that “the great discovery of the age in which we live is the immense prominence given in the Gospel to the Kingdom of God. To us it is quite extraordinary that it figures so little in the theology and religious writings of almost the entire period of Christian history. Certainly in the synoptic Gospels it has a prominence that could hardly be increased” (*Personal Religion and the Life of Fellowship*, Longmans, Green & Co., 1926, p. 69). Since the Gospel is the Gospel of the Kingdom, its absence from theology means the loss of the Gospel.

Fathers rejected the book...“Finally, everyone thinks of it whatever his spirit imparts. My spirit cannot adapt itself to the book, and a sufficient reason why I do not esteem it highly is that Christ is neither taught nor recognized in it, which is what an Apostle ought before all things to do.” Later (1534) Luther finds a possibility of Christian usefulness in it...He still thought it a hidden, dumb prophecy, unless interpreted, and upon the interpretation no certainty had been reached after many efforts...But he remained doubtful about its apostolicity (Preface to Revelation in the edition of 1545), and printed it with Hebrews, James, Jude as an appendix to his New Testament, not numbered in the index. “In general the standpoint of the Reformation is marked by a return to the Canon of Eusebius, and consequently by a lower valuation of Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2, 3 John, James, Jude and Revelation.” Zwingli regarded Revelation as “not a biblical book.” And even Calvin, with his high view of inspiration, does not comment on 2 and 3 John and Revelation.”<sup>81</sup>

Olshausen puts his finger unerringly on the great Reformer’s blind spot when he remarks that the final book of the Bible was obscure to Luther simply because “he could not thoroughly apprehend the doctrine of God’s Kingdom on earth, which is exhibited in Revelation, and forms the proper center of everything contained in it.”<sup>82</sup>

We should add that the Kingdom of God on earth is the organizing center of the entirety of Scripture and the heart of the saving Gospel as Jesus preached it.

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<sup>81</sup> “Revelation,” *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 4.

<sup>82</sup> McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 6.

# 12

## Baptism

As one who has learned almost everything by being challenged on various biblical issues over 40 years, I venture to stimulate the thinking of some fellow believers on the question of baptism. These are friends, whose zeal for the Bible is undoubted, who have been taught that baptism in water is a pointless ritual not now applicable to Christians.

The argument has been put this way: “There are two major baptisms in the New Testament: a) water baptism begun by John the Baptist; b) baptism in the spirit — the baptism which Jesus Christ baptizes with and which makes someone a Christian.”

Take a careful look at the above statement. It is really not a fair account of what the Bible teaches. There is a major missing factor. The facts are that Jesus *also* baptized in water. There are therefore three baptisms, not two: a) the water baptism of John; b) the water baptism authorized by Jesus; c) baptism in the spirit.

Everyone is familiar with the baptism of John. It has clearly been superseded by Christian baptism (Acts 19:1-7). Apostolic Christian baptism is both by water and by spirit. In John 4:1, 2 we learn that “Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself was not baptizing, but his disciples were).” John 3:22 says that “Jesus and his disciples came into the land of Judea, and there Jesus was spending time with them and baptizing.” There is no doubt therefore that Jesus baptized in water (although the actual act of immersion was performed by his agents, the disciples). This initiation ceremony was baptism performed by Jesus — Christian baptism in water.

The great commission mandates that disciples *until the end of the age* go into all nations and teach whatever Jesus taught. Part of that commanded discipling process is “baptizing them into the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). That is a clear command from the lips of Jesus, and it constitutes an essential element of the marching orders of the church.

The Apostles clearly understood it that way. Peter's appeal to his first-century audience has not become obsolete: "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). The typical initiation into the church is by repentance, believing the Gospel of the Kingdom and the Name of Jesus Christ and baptism in water. Acts 8:12 provides an early creed: "When they believed Philip as he proclaimed the Gospel about the Kingdom and the Name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, both men and women."

As if to leave no possible loopholes, Luke reports that even after the reception of Holy Spirit, the Gentiles were to be baptized in water. This was expressly commanded by Peter, who was conscientiously following Jesus' orders in Matthew 28. He called for water and ordered "them to be baptized who had received the holy spirit" (Acts 10:47, 48). When Paul discovered converts who had received John's water baptism only, he immediately administered Christian water baptism into the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:5). The New Testament church certainly did not teach that spirit baptism replaced Christian water baptism. The two go together as the standard way in which a person is joined to the body of Christ. Late in his career Peter can still talk of "baptism which saves" us, as "an appeal to God for a good conscience" (1 Pet. 3:21). Of course, no one is suggesting that there is anything "magical" in the water. What counts is the childlike submission to the ordinance prescribed by Jesus. It is a simple matter of obedience and obedience is fundamental to faith, the "obedience of faith." "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who disobeys the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36).

Baptism without a persistent continuation in the Christian life cannot save a person, any more than a one-time decision which is not followed by life-long commitment. Salvation is by grace and faith, which means also (in Paul's words) "obedience from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed" (Rom. 6:17). That teaching included baptism. This way of inviting converts to become Christians is a part of what salvation by faith

meant to the Apostles. They taught the “obedience of faith” everywhere (Rom. 1:5; 16:26).

God has given us a proper procedure for admission to His church. Baptism in water is a *public* renouncing of sin and a determination to serve God and the Messiah. Labels like “carnal ordinance” or “legalism” misrepresent the apostolic teaching about Christian water baptism. Jesus himself was baptized in water (Luke 3:21). He made and baptized converts (John 4:1), and he ordered his followers to make and baptize converts (Matt. 28:19, 20) until his return at the end of the age.

There is no need for division or difference over this very simple matter, which has not been a problematic issue for millions of Bible readers, and thousands of learned commentators on Scripture over many centuries.

Evangelicals recognize that Peter’s appeal for repentance and baptism is strikingly different from modern evangelistic formulas. Writing on “Conversion in the Bible,” R.T. France observes that:

Our tendency to see baptism as a symbolic optional extra, or to be embarrassed by the inclusion of a physical act as part of the spiritual process of conversion, contrasts with the strongly “realist” language of the New Testament about the saving significance of baptism (e.g., John 3:5; Rom. 6:3, 4; Gal. 3:27; Col. 2:12; Tit. 3:5; 1 Pet. 3:20-21). While there are no New Testament grounds for believing that baptism *by itself* makes a person a Christian, the idea of an unbaptized Christian is equally foreign to its thought. “Without it [baptism] a believer did not enter the primitive community of faith” (S. Smalley).<sup>83</sup>

We appeal, therefore, to our fellow Bible students who have been caught in the false “spiritual” view that the physical act of baptism is not part of Christian discipleship. It was the Gnostics who created a mistaken division between what is physical and what is spiritual. The Apostles, in mandating water baptism, were obedient, as we should be, to the command of Christ. And recognizing the Lordship of Jesus is the heart of what it means to be a believer. There is no genuine confession of Jesus as Lord without obedience (Rom. 10:9).

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<sup>83</sup> *Evangelical Quarterly*, 65:4, 1992, p. 306.

## 13

# Jesus and the Elixir of Life

Most human beings would give anything to be able to prolong life indefinitely. Jesus' mission to humanity implied the astonishing claim to be in possession of the secret of living permanently. He came to bring "life and immortality to light through the Gospel" (2 Tim. 1:10). That priceless information is accessed only by intelligent belief in his *teaching/word/Gospel* of the Kingdom as well as belief in his death and resurrection. Churchgoers talk somewhat vaguely about "eternal life." This phrase does not fully represent the original idea. It means more precisely "the life of the Age to Come." The expression is a Jewish one that Jesus loved and used frequently. He found it in Daniel 12:2 where there is a grand promise of resurrection for the sleeping dead. When multitudes awake from their sleep of death in the dust of the ground (Dan. 12:2), they will attain to the "Life of the Age [to Come]." It is the Age to Come because it is the age of world history which *follows* the future resurrection of the dead. That resurrection of all the faithful happens when Jesus returns (1 Cor. 15:23). That precious verse in Daniel 12:2 tells us also with marvelous simplicity what the dead are now doing, and where they are doing it. It is one of the Bible's most lucid testimonies to the present condition of the dead prior to the resurrection. They are sleeping — unconscious. Such truth ought once and for all to demonstrate the futility of "prayers" offered to Mary or any other "departed Saint."

That Life of the Age to Come, of which Daniel first and the New Testament after him spoke, is indeed life in perpetuity, but it is life to be gained finally and fully in the Age to Come. That means that there is going to be an "Age to Come." Time will continue in that coming age, and the earth will be renewed under the administration of the Messiah Jesus who will return in power at the beginning of the New Age — not seven years before that time

to perform a *secret* rapture, as some popular schemes have proposed and propagated.

Translators of the Bible sometimes make it difficult for us to gather the sense of the original. The King James Version (beautiful in its way but badly corrupted in certain verses) makes you think that there will be “no more time” when Jesus comes back! That verse in Revelation 10:6 actually states nothing of the sort. It means only that there is to be “no more delay.” The Second Coming will follow immediately. But time will continue: it will be the Age to Come of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Churches have tended to make the Bible in many respects hard to understand. While they go on talking about “heaven” as the goal of the Christian, the Bible says the opposite. Jesus promised *the earth* as the future inheritance of his followers. Quoting Psalm 37:11 Jesus defined the destiny of his followers as the inheritance of the land or earth (Matt. 5:5). He announced this at the very heart of his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount, and all the teachings of Jesus, are given to us as necessary instructions for the present life, as we prepare to enter the Kingdom of God on earth when it comes at the Second Coming. At the Second Coming the faithful dead of all the ages will awake from their present sleep of death in “dust-land” (Dan. 12:2) and they will then “inherit the earth” as Jesus promised (Matt. 5:5) and, in fact, “rule as kings with Jesus *on the earth*” (Rev. 5:10; cp. Rev. 20:9 which describes the residence of the saints as on the earth). Jesus, according to the verse preceding (Rev. 5:9), has died to ratify the Kingdom covenant with his blood and to secure our forgiveness by his reconciling death. At the last supper Jesus spoke of this “blood of the covenant,” and the covenant is God’s arrangement/contract/promise to give Christians (Jesus spoke to the Apostles as representing the faith) the Kingdom of God with Jesus. “Just as my Father has *covenanted* with me to give me the Kingdom, so I *covenant* with you to give you the Kingdom...and you will sit on twelve thrones to administer the [regathered] twelve tribes” (Luke 22:29, 30). Some translations now correctly, we think, remind us that the word “grant” is really the verb “covenant.” The word is indeed related to “covenant.” Jesus had

just been talking about shedding his “covenant blood” (Luke 22:20).

Jesus, as the “new Moses” and the “new Joshua,” promises the Land or the Kingdom of God on earth to the faithful. It is the confirmation of the ancient “Land Promise” made to Abraham. When Jesus spoke of “this Gospel of the Kingdom” (Matt. 24:14) he provided a comprehensive title for his plan for human immortality in the coming Kingdom. Just as “this book of the Law” (Torah) was communicated through Moses (Deut. 30:10), the one greater than Moses delivered the New Torah summarized as the Gospel of the Kingdom.

The patriarch Abraham is known in Scripture as the father of the faithful. His faith is the model of Christian faith. Believers are described as following in the footsteps of the faith of Abraham (Rom. 4:16). They are heirs, Jews and Gentiles alike, of exactly the same promises made by God to Abraham. To Abraham the Christian Gospel had been preached in advance (Gal. 3:8). The divine promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the rock-foundation of the New Testament Gospel. Abraham was promised the land of Canaan (property) and offspring (posterity). God’s unilateral proposal to him was a guarantee of both “seed and soil.” The seed or descendants were to be many and in a special sense one individual, that is Christ (Gal. 3:16). The “soil” was the Promised Land, or more exactly the Land of the Promise (Heb. 11:9). In that promised land the patriarchs resided as “resident aliens” (Heb. 11:9), believing, based on the divine word, that their country of residence would one day be transformed into the “heavenly” Kingdom of God on earth. This means that the Land was really theirs by divine promise, but during their lifetime they owned none of it. (Abraham had to purchase from the actual owners of the land a small plot in which to bury his wife Sarah.)

The vitally important Gospel truth is that Abraham actually lived in the Land of the Promise (Heb. 11:9). This proves beyond any argument that the Promised Land is not “heaven,” as a place removed from this planet. The Promised Land was a territory in the Middle East. That territory remains the Promised Land. It will be the scene of the coming Kingdom. Its rightful King, the Messiah, will return to take over that country and extend his rulership across

the globe. The Promised Land is thus nothing other than the promised Kingdom of God — the heart of Jesus' saving Gospel. Jesus could say equally, "Blessed are the gentle. They will have the Land as their inheritance" (Matt. 5:5) or "Blessed are the humble in spirit for the Kingdom of Heaven<sup>84</sup> belongs to them" (Matt. 5:3) by divine promise. In order for the promise to be fulfilled for Abraham, the patriarch must return to life by resurrection. Only then will he receive the promised reward and inheritance on which the divine covenant was based (see Heb. 11:13, 39, 40).

When the Kingdom comes (as we pray in the Lord's prayer, "Thy Kingdom come") Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the Old Testament and New Testament faithful will arise in resurrection (from their present sleep in the dust of the ground, Dan. 12:2) and sit down at a grand celebration to inaugurate the New Age of the Kingdom of God on earth (Matt. 8:11). Many others will assemble from the four corners of the compass and join them at that spectacular banquet (Luke 13:28, 29). In order to qualify for a place at that banquet, we are urged by Jesus to prepare now with all urgency and diligence. That is in fact what the Gospel is all about. Jesus exhorts us to make the Kingdom of God and gaining a place in it our first priority (Matt. 6:33). All other ambitions and activities must take second place. Jesus called his Message "the Gospel about the Kingdom" (Mark 1:14, 15), and Matthew, when he used the noun Gospel, always qualified it as "the Gospel *about the Kingdom*" (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; cp. 26:13). Jesus declared his mission statement in Luke 4:43: "I am duty bound to preach the *Gospel about the Kingdom of God* to the other towns: that is the reason why God commissioned me" — that is what I was sent to do. Since he dispatched his followers to continue the same commission (Luke 9:2, 60; Matt. 28:19, 20; Luke 24:47), we would expect churches everywhere to be concerned with the

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<sup>84</sup> The Jewish expression "Kingdom of Heaven" (used only by Matthew) means exactly the same as the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom's origin is divine, heavenly, but this does not mean that it is to be *located* in heaven. It is now reserved with God in heaven pending the return of Jesus to the earth to inaugurate it in Jerusalem (1 Pet. 1:4; Col. 1:5).

Gospel of the Kingdom. This phrase, however, has apparently disappeared from contemporary presentations of “the Gospel.”

Jesus according to Luke 24:47 declared that “repentance and forgiveness” are offered only on the basis of Jesus’ name, that is, his own Gospel revelation. As in Mark 4:11, 12 reception of the Kingdom Gospel (Matt. 13:19) is the essential element in the acceptance of Jesus himself. Jesus made the same point often. He warned that “those who are ashamed of me *and my words*” will fare disastrously in the judgment (Mark 8:38). The separation of Jesus from his words is *the* major theological disaster to be avoided at all costs. Satan really has only one trick, in various guises: to detach Jesus from his teachings/Gospel (see also 2 John 7-9; 1 Tim. 6:3).

With his urgent call to repent and believe the Gospel about the Kingdom (Mark 1:14, 15 — a summary of Christianity according to Jesus), Jesus was in fact inviting people everywhere to a place in that coming, covenanted Kingdom as co-executives with himself. Jesus, as Messiah, planned to “fix” the world, but he knew that he must first die, be resurrected and leave the world for a time. He is currently with the Father at His right hand, and he will depart from the presence of the Father and return to the earth when the time comes for the Kingdom to be inaugurated on the earth.

In this connection Psalm 110:1 is a most useful verse. It is the Apostles’ and Jesus’ favorite “proof-text.” It is referred to in the New Testament 23 times — and is thus quoted much more often than any other verse from the Old Testament. Its importance is massive. It is also a revolutionary Psalm since it tells us about the relationship of God and Jesus. Psalm 110:1 is a divine utterance (poorly translated if your version leaves out the original word “oracle”). It is “the oracle of Yahweh” (the One God of the Hebrew Bible, of Judaism and New Testament Christianity) to David’s lord who is the Messiah, spoken of here 1000 years before he came into existence in the womb of the virgin Mary.

I call attention to the simple fact that David’s lord is not David’s Lord. There should be no capital on the word “lord.” The Revised Version of the Bible (1881) corrected the misleading error of other translations which put (and still wrongly put) a capital L on lord in that verse. What is at stake here? An enormously

important truth about who Jesus is. He is not the Lord *God*, because the word in the inspired text is not the word for Deity, but the word for a human superior — a *human* lord, not a Lord who is himself God, but a lord who is the supremely exalted, unique agent of the One God. You may have to check this fact with a rabbi or friend who can read the Hebrew of the Old Testament. The Hebrew word for the status of the Son of God in Psalm 110:1 is *adoni*. This word occurs 195 times in the Hebrew Bible and never refers to God. When God is described as “the Lord” (capital L) a different word, *Adonai*, appears. Thus the Bible makes a careful distinction between God and man. God is the Lord God (*Adonai*), or when His personal name is used, Yahweh, and Jesus is His unique, sinless, virginally conceived human son (*adoni*, my lord, Luke 1:43; 2:11). *Adonai* is found 449 times in the Old Testament and distinguishes the One God from all others. *Adonai* is not the word describing the Son of God, Jesus, in Psalm 110:1.<sup>85</sup> *Adoni* appears 195 times and refers only to a human (or occasionally an angelic) lord, that is, someone who is *not* God. This should cut through a lot of complicated post-biblical argumentation and creed-making which in subtle ways obscured the simplest and most basic biblical truth, that God is a single Person and that the Messiah is the second Adam, “the man Messiah” (1 Tim. 2:5). That “man Messiah Jesus” so perfectly and consistently reflected the character and will of his Father that he could say, “He who has seen me has seen my Father” (John 14:9). Nevertheless by himself he could do nothing (John 8:28). He was always dependent on and subordinate to his Father, God.

### **Back to the Gospel of the Kingdom**

This is the saving Message which Jesus and Paul always offered to the public.<sup>86</sup> Jesus, having preached the Gospel of the Kingdom, commanded the Apostles and disciples till the end of the age, to take the same Message/Gospel of the Kingdom of God to the whole world (Matt. 28:19, 20). This task has apparently been

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<sup>85</sup> Unfortunately a number of authorities and commentaries misstate the facts on this point.

<sup>86</sup> Matt. 4:17, 23; 9:35; 24:14; Mark 1:14, 15; Luke 4:43; Acts 1:3, 6; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31.

poorly executed, since professing Christians have used every descriptive term for the Gospel, *except* the one always found on the lips of Jesus, “the Gospel of the Kingdom.” If we compare Luke 9:11 with Acts 28:30, 31 we find that Jesus and Paul typically “welcomed the people” and immediately began to address the most crucial of all Gospel topics, the Kingdom of God. Astonishingly, some today do not even believe that the Gospel Jesus preached should be preached at all. They suppose, quite mistakenly, that Paul was given a different Gospel for the Gentiles. If this were so, Paul would have put himself under his own curse (Gal. 1:8, 9) for abandoning the one and only true saving Gospel. There is only one saving Gospel Message offered to every human being.

The importance of the Kingdom Gospel cannot be exaggerated. In it Jesus offers us the elixir of life. He presents a message for our intelligent reception which promises us life indefinitely. Here is how the Message of immortality works. First you have to hear it declared clearly. Secondly you have to grasp it with understanding, the understanding of a “child” whose eyes and ears are open to divine revelation (see Eph. 1:13). Thirdly you have to maintain it in your life, despite the perennial distractions of persecution, worry, and desire for other things (Luke 8:15). All this Jesus made entirely clear in his most fundamental illustration about the seed and soils (the parable of the sower, Matt. 13; Mark 4; Luke 8). In that wonderful theological “comparison” Jesus said that salvation is a process which must begin, continue and persist to the end. It all depends on an initial intelligent acceptance of the “seed” Gospel of the Kingdom as Jesus preached it. Only those who maintain faith and obedience to the end will be saved (Matt. 24:13). Salvation for New Testament Christians is like a race. The goal, salvation, “is now closer to us than when we first believed” (Rom. 13:11). We are “being saved” now (1 Cor. 1:18; 15:2), and we were saved “in hope” (Rom. 8:24), and we will be saved at the return of Jesus.

You don’t win a gold medal when the starting gun goes off and you don’t graduate from the university at orientation. Salvation is a race to the end and the stimulus which gets us started is the Gospel of the Kingdom, which imparts to us the energy of God Himself (1 Thess. 2:13; John 6:63).

### **How Life Forever Is Obtained**

Here is how life forever and ever is to be acquired. You hear the Gospel/Word of the Kingdom. You understand it and you respond to it by making it the first priority in your life. You value it so highly that you (figuratively speaking) sell all your properties in order to buy the one field which contains the treasure, the pearl of great price, the secret of immortality. When you are in pursuit of life forever, what else could possibly make an equal demand on your attention?

How does that spark of life arise within you? It is a new creation by the word of God. The word of the Gospel is God's creative tool, a "spark" of His own immortality imparted via the words of Jesus to believing man. "Word of God" does not just mean the Bible as a whole. (The Bible generally calls itself "the Scriptures.") It means the Gospel of the Kingdom, the Message of immortality and how to gain it (Matt. 13:19, word of the Kingdom = Mark 4:14, the word = Luke 8:11, the word of God). The word is God's creative tool. It is a part of Himself and expresses His desire for us as humans. With His creative word He intends to share and impart His own immortality. He wants human beings to live forever. He wants to give us (by His grace) endless life and He imparts His "seed" to us, to spark that new life and vitality which is the beginning or downpayment — first installment — of immortality (Eph. 1:14). When that "seed" is taken into our hearts and minds, we have made the transition from death to life.

John 5:24 summarizes the salvation process brilliantly: "Truly I tell you: he who *hears my word* [Gospel Message] and believes Him who commissioned me has eternal life [the Life of the Age to Come]. He does not come into judgment, but has made the transition from death to life."

Everything depends on hearing, grasping and holding on — in the face of difficulty, distraction, affliction and persecution — to that precious word/Gospel of the Kingdom. No wonder Jesus described the Kingdom in terms calculated to impress on us its inestimable value as the pearl of great price, the treasure above all treasures.

The saving Message of Jesus is called a seed (Luke 8:11). That seed must lodge in our minds. It is sown by the one preaching. It must be received “in an honest heart” (Luke 8:15). Those who welcome that seed “in a good and honest heart” must “bear fruit *with patience*” (Luke 8:15). All the Bible writers tell the same Gospel story. All offer the same “formula” for immortality. The “mechanics” or process of embarking on the immortality program are common to all the New Testament writers. James said that this rebirth, the germination of new life from the seed of the Gospel, is through the word, the word of the Truth (James 1:18; cp. “Your word is truth,” John 17:17). The word must take root within us: “Receive with meekness the word planted [i.e., sown] within you, which is able to save you” (James 1:21). That word is the Gospel of the Kingdom of God as Jesus preached it. Matthew called it the “word of the Kingdom” (Matt. 13:19). James, of course, knew all about the parable of the sower. Peter, as chief spokesman for the Messiah, made quite sure that we remember the process of salvation, the science of gaining immortality by being born again. He spoke, as had Jesus and his half-brother James, of the word of the Gospel as “incorruptible seed” (1 Pet. 1:23) — a seed, in other words, which carries in itself the germ of immortality. The seed transmits the very nature of God Himself. By participating in that nature, via the seed of the Kingdom Message sown in our hearts, we are participating in the indestructible life of God Himself. The seed, received and retained, creates in us a new root of personality, makes us new creatures, reborn human beings destined to live forever (1 Pet. 1:23-25). The indispensable key to this miraculous second birth is the “word which was preached to you as the Gospel” (1 Pet. 1:25). That Message discloses the secret of the divine plan in Christ for human destiny.

John the Apostle knew about the seed and how it is the key to be being “born again” with a view to immortality. In John 3:3 he reports Jesus as saying to a Jewish scholar: “Unless you are born again you cannot enter the Kingdom.” No rebirth, no living forever. And no rebirth without a living “seed.” John later reminded his readers that rebirth comes from seed. He too knew the immense value of Jesus’ precious teaching about the seed and the soils. John said that the person who “has been born again

cannot continue in sin, because *God's seed* remains in him" (1 John 3:9). In making rebirth the absolutely essential prerequisite for immortality, Jesus made it clear that the reception of the Kingdom Gospel was the key to life forever: "Unless you receive the Kingdom of God as a little child, you will not enter it" (Luke 18:17). "If you do not listen to and grasp the Gospel of the Kingdom (the word), you cannot repent and be forgiven" (see Mark 4:11, 12). Mark here, reporting Jesus, makes an intelligent, open-eyed grasp of the Kingdom Gospel as Jesus preached it the condition of repentance and forgiveness. The Devil, knowing how fatal the Kingdom Gospel is to his own opposing activity, attempts to "snatch away the word which has been sown in their hearts, so that they cannot believe it and be saved" (Luke 8:12).

Here in the parable of the sower is the very heart of Jesus' immortality Message. Listen to the extraordinary words of the Master Rabbi, from a boat anchored just off the shore of the Lake of Galilee:

"To you has been graciously given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but to those who are outside everything comes as a puzzle, so that seeing they may not see and it will not be clear to them, and hearing it they will not get the sense. If they did, they would turn to God in repentance and be forgiven." And he said to them, "If you are not clear about this parable, how will you be clear about any of the others?" (Mark 4:11-13).

### **Paul and Rebirth**

Paul of course was no stranger to the secrets of immortality. He taught that rebirth, regeneration, happens by the renewing power of the spirit of God (Gal. 4:29) via the Gospel (Gal. 3:2). Christians are those who are born of the spirit, born of the promises made to Abraham (Gal. 4:23), recipients of "the holy spirit of the promise" (Eph. 1:13). It makes no difference whether we speak of the spirit of God or the word of God as the tool of rebirth. Both the spirit and the word mean the creative presence and power of God, as He undertakes His mightiest and most miraculous work: the production in human beings of the spark of immortality, the gift of Life in the Coming Age/Kingdom. In Genesis "God's spirit hovered over the chaos" and "God said..." (Gen. 1:2, 3). God's word was active with His spirit. (Spirit is to the divine word as

human breath is to spoken utterance.) The creative activity of God through the Gospel stimulates the new life of the believer. “The Spirit comes through hearing the Gospel Message” (see Gal. 3:2).

Paul reminded Titus of the immortality “program.” “When the goodness and gracious kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us [through Jesus’ preaching and his death and resurrection], not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but through His mercy, by the washing of rebirth and renewal in the holy spirit (Titus 3:4, 5).

It was Jesus, the original Gospel preacher (Heb. 2:3; cp. 1 Tim. 6:3), who was equipped with the saving word/words of God Himself (John 5:24). The Father, using Jesus as His perfect agent and emissary, gave Jesus the creative words with which we can be infused with the new life of rebirth. “The words I speak to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63). They contain the very energy and vitality of God Himself. They operate as an energizing power in our life (1 Thess. 2:13; Rom. 1:16). They bring the influence of the spirit, which is the operational presence of God, into our experience and our thinking. They produce in the end a condition of endless life, for those who have taken the words of life to heart and, after being baptized (Acts 8:12, etc.), continue to bear fruit to the end.

Paul’s comment marks him out as a genuine disciple of Jesus, showing that he was following the Master as a preacher of the Kingdom of God Gospel. He spoke to the Colossians of “the hope reserved in heaven with Christ.” That hope, Paul said, was the source of Christian faith and love (Col. 1:4, 5). What terrible damage would be done, then, to faith and love if *the hope* which produces these virtues was not clearly understood! The hope in question had been transmitted to them “in the word of the Truth, the Gospel” (Col. 1:5), reminding us again of the parable of the sower. Paul described that saving Gospel and its hope as “bearing fruit and growing” (Col. 1:6). Once more the reference to Jesus’ parable of the sower is clear.

Jesus came offering the public the Elixir of Life, the fountain of eternal youth. He offered it on his conditions, or rather the condition of the God of Israel who commissioned him to present the saving Gospel. He urged the public to embrace his Gospel of

the coming Kingdom and the promise of ruling with Christ in the New Age of that Kingdom to be inaugurated on earth, “the inhabited earth of the future, about which we are speaking” (Heb. 2:5).

The ultimate goal of God’s great purpose revealed in the Gospel is that His people would be in power as princes in the place promised to Abraham and Messiah, the Land of the Promise, the earth transformed by the presence of Jesus who will then have returned to this planet. As Messiah he will “inherit the throne of his ancestor David” in Jerusalem (Luke 1:32). He will do this because he is God’s Son, so constituted by the miracle of creation effected by God in the womb of Mary (Luke 1:35; Matt. 1:20, “that which is begotten in her”).

One would think that more people would be interested in immortality, endless, indestructible life and fellowship with Jesus and his Father now and forever. Our human task is to search out the secret of life in perpetuity, the pearl of great price, the treasure of the Kingdom Gospel as Jesus preached it.

Did you hear any sermons recently about being born again with a view to immortality and how this happens by contact with the power of the word/seed/spirit contained in Jesus’ creative Kingdom of God Message?

Many have been short-changed by being told that the death and resurrection of Jesus alone are the whole of the Gospel. Paul said otherwise. He taught that the death and resurrection of Jesus are “among things of first importance” in the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:3). He himself was a career preacher of the Gospel of the Kingdom (Acts 20:24, 25). Jesus had labored for years, described in some 25 chapters of Matthew, Mark and Luke, preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, while saying, at that stage, not a word about his death and resurrection (see Matt. 16:21 for his first announcement of that part of the Gospel).

Creeds, however, appear to have missed the point of Jesus’ saving Message about immortality. They urge belief in his birth (“born of the Virgin Mary”) and then skip right over his Kingdom Gospel preaching career to his death (“suffered under Pontius Pilate...”).

Belief in Jesus apart from belief in his words does not measure up to the biblical definition of belief. “He who *hears my word* and believes Him who sent me has eternal life” (John 5:24). At the climax of his career Jesus issued a stern warning against rejection of his saving teaching. He could hardly have made it plainer (John 12:44-50; Matt. 7:21-27).

Throughout his ministry the Messiah requires belief in his Gospel Message. To drive a wedge between Jesus and his teaching undermines the entire constitution of apostolic Christianity. “Faith comes by hearing and hearing through Messiah’s word” (Rom. 10:17).<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> It is disconcerting to hear a leading evangelical preacher of our time say, “Many people today think 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’ll see that there’s almost nothing whatsoever 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 is 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*” (D. James Kennedy, “Truths That Transform,” 11/17/89, emphasis his).

# 14

## Conclusion

B.F. Westcott was undoubtedly right: “It is not enough to recognize that the Old Testament contains prophecies; the Old Testament is one vast prophecy.”

A large part of that prophecy deals with the Messianic Kingdom in its final manifestation as a worldwide government under the supervision of Jesus and the faithful Christians. It is that Kingdom, we believe, which forms the heart of the Christian Gospel, and it is that Kingdom which is largely absent from received systems of what we know as Christian theology. Jesus, in other words, has been detached from and robbed of his own Gospel.

Surely Rodolf Otto’s analysis is correct: “The Kingdom of God is and remains for Christ the future Kingdom of the final age, thought of in strictly eschatological terms, following on the ‘Messianic woes’ following on the Divine Judgment.”<sup>88</sup>

We know that the “Messianic woes” remained future in Jesus’ thinking (“These are the beginning of birth pangs,” Matt. 24:8). They were to be the prelude to the arrival of the Kingdom, whose preparation in the present age is the subject of the parables. The Word of the Kingdom is sown in the heart now (Matt. 13:19). The Christian is to become “a disciple of the Kingdom” (Matt. 13:52). The harvest born by the Message is reaped at the end of the age, when the genuine sons of the Kingdom will shine forth in the Kingdom of their Father (Matt. 13:43). It is true that the faithful can experience something of the miracle of the Kingdom now, in advance of the coming of the Kingdom. They are an advance guard, heralding the Good News of a better world to come — but one which is a real human society, renewed and reeducated, and in the hands of immortalized administrators. “How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?...For He has not subjected to

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<sup>88</sup> *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man*, Boston: Starr King Press, 1957, p. 10.

angels the inhabited world to come of which we speak” (Heb. 2:3, 5). Would that contemporary churchgoers could speak that kind of language and know what they were saying — for He has placed that future world in the hands of Jesus and the faithful church. The world is “not yet” under Jesus’ control but it is destined to come under his jurisdiction when he returns (Heb. 2:5, 8).

It is a bizarre system of exposition which can accuse the Apostles of blindness for their Jewish-Christian Messianism when, in Acts 1:6, they inquired about the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel. The question was put by the Apostles on the eve of Pentecost after they had been fully informed by Jesus who “explained everything privately to his disciples” (Mark 4:34). Jesus had earlier assured himself that they had fully understood the Kingdom (Matt. 13:51). At the Last Supper he formally covenanted with them to grant them positions of royalty in the coming divine rule (Luke 22:28-30). For six weeks after his resurrection they were again instructed in “the things concerning the Kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). On the basis of all they had heard and understood, they asked whether the time had now come for the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel. It is the right question, not, as so many commentators try to persuade us, a horrible mistake!

The form of the question itself reflects the common Jewish idea of the Messiah’s kingdom, and shows how far the apostles still were from real insight into the nature of their Master’s mission. How incredible it is that these men should have been instructed during 40 days and had not even ceased to expect...an earthly Jewish empire in which they themselves should hold high places around the Messiah’s person...It is a mark of the author’s candor that he records such a mistaken idea of the apostles in their earlier days.<sup>89</sup>

John Calvin’s failure to grasp the Kingdom of God in its proper Jewish Messianic sense is explicit in his astonishing criticism of Jesus and his instructed and accredited disciples. Commenting on the enlightened “famous last” question of the apostles to Jesus: “Has the time now come for you to restore the Kingdom to Israel,” Calvin says: “There are more errors in the question [in Acts 1:6] than there are words...Their blindness is remarkable, that when

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<sup>89</sup> *The Century Bible, Acts*, London: Caxton Publishing Co., n.d., p. 126.

they had been so fully and carefully instructed over a period of three years they betrayed no less ignorance than if they had never heard a word.”<sup>90</sup> But Jesus offered no such criticism. The blindness is Calvin’s to the Jewish-Christian Messianic and Davidic Gospel of Jesus, which is the backbone of all Scripture.

It is indeed incredible and impossible that the Apostles should have been mistaken about the nature of the Kingdom which had been the heart of all that Jesus had taught them! Nothing, here or elsewhere, suggests that Jesus disapproved of their hope for a “concrete” Kingdom of God on earth. The time for the restoration was not known, and the path to greatness in the Kingdom was through humility, sacrifice and service, *but the reality of the future Kingdom was never in question*. Indeed, only a few days later, we find the Apostles proclaiming the Gospel to the Jewish people under the influence of the spirit of God. They still believed in the great restoration which was the burden of all that the prophets had seen: “Heaven must receive Jesus until the times of the restoration of all things, of which times all the prophets have spoken” (Acts 3:21).

There is no dramatic new understanding of the Kingdom. The Kingdom remains the Kingdom of Hebrew prophecy which, but for nearly 1800 years of anti-Messianic commentary, would have been clearly understood by ordinary readers of the Bible.<sup>91</sup> It is high time for scholars and preachers to abandon their unwarranted opposition to Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, and to join him in announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. Critics must also come to see that their skepticism is an attack on the core of the Christian Gospel:

The coming of the transcendental Son of Man to achieve the catastrophic transformation of the present aeon, or order...has proved to be one of the beliefs about man and the world and their

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<sup>90</sup> *Calvin's Commentaries, Acts of the Apostles*, ed. D.W. Torrance and T.F. Torrance, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965, p 25.

<sup>91</sup> The reality of the future Messianic Kingdom was removed from theology largely by Augustine who “pushed it completely into the background and replaced it by another scheme of eschatology, which since the fifth century has been regarded more or less as the orthodox teaching” (P. Toon, ed., in the introduction to *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Eschatology 1600-1660*, Cambridge: James Clarke, 1970, p. 13).

history which Jesus shared with his contemporaries and which time and the advance of knowledge have left behind as the relics of a bygone mentality.<sup>92</sup>

If that really is the case, Jesus was sadly mistaken and can be safely dismissed as a false prophet. But the fault lies with the unbelieving commentators, whose aversion to the Messianism of the New Testament has resulted in their rejection of the whole promise of the Kingdom:

The Messiah, whose birth the angel proclaimed, is depicted in the form of a king who shall occupy and hold forever the throne of his father (ancestor) David. A restored Jewish kingdom is predicted, and this prediction ultimately proved not only an illusion, but incompatible with the spiritual kingdom which Jesus proclaimed and sought to establish...The angelic communication, under the influence of current belief, is based on a misconception of historic reality. It is, to say the least, rather disconcerting to find what purports to be a revelation from a heavenly source misinterpreting a prophecy and also predicting a restored Davidic kingdom which failed to materialize.<sup>93</sup>

In other words, "Poor old Gabriel! He got it all wrong." And so, adds the chorus of commentators, did the disciples when they still expected that "Jewish" Kingdom in Acts 1:6. But then Jesus himself, it would seem, was also in the dark about the Kingdom when he promised his followers positions of authority over Israel (Luke 22:28-30) and urged them to strive for rulership with him in the coming new era (Rev. 2:26; 3:21).

Expositors of the Bible, and indeed the entire traditional Christian system, urgently need a new orientation. We must cease mounting our own tradition against the word of God,<sup>94</sup> and return to the Messianic Good News of the Kingdom and to belief in Jesus, the Jewish Christ, Savior of the world, now exalted to the right hand of his Father and destined to return and rule as Messiah and King. "Even so, Lord Jesus, come!" (Rev. 22:20).

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<sup>92</sup> James McKinnon, *The Historic Jesus*, Longmans, Green & Co., 1931, p. 207.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 6.

<sup>94</sup> Is Jesus' criticism of traditions which nullify the divine Word any less relevant today? (Matt. 15:8, 9).

## Scripture Index

### Genesis

Gen. 1:2, 3.....	107
Gen. 13:15.....	80
Gen. 17:8.....	80

### Deuteronomy

Deut. 18:15.....	59
Deut. 30:10.....	100

### 2 Samuel

2 Sam. 7.....	33
2 Sam. 7:14.....	59, 73

### 1 Chronicles

1 Chron. 17.....	33
------------------	----

### Psalms

Ps. 2:6, 8, 9.....	51
Ps. 2:7.....	59, 73
Ps. 2:8.....	37
Ps. 2:9.....	37
Ps. 2:12.....	37
Ps. 37:11.....	81, 99
Ps. 110:1.....	27, 51, 59, 102, 103
Ps. 122:5.....	42

### Isaiah

Isa. 1:26.....	42
Isa. 2:3, 4.....	20
Isa. 9:6, 7.....	20
Isa. 11:4.....	90, 91
Isa. 16:5.....	19
Isa. 24:23.....	19
Isa. 30:27-33.....	90
Isa. 30:27-32:4.....	91
Isa. 32:1.....	42
Isa. 40:9-11.....	22
Isa. 52:6-10.....	22
Isa. 53:11.....	69
Isa. 61:1, 2.....	22

### Jeremiah

Jer. 23:5, 6.....	20, 61
-------------------	--------

### Daniel

Dan. 2:44.....	20
Dan. 7:14, 27.....	20
Dan. 7:25.....	90
Dan. 7:27.....	21
Dan. 8:13.....	89, 92
Dan. 9:24-27.....	89
Dan. 9:26.....	89
Dan. 9:26, 27.....	89, 90
Dan. 9:27.....	92
Dan. 10:14.....	92
Dan. 11:21ff.....	90
Dan. 11:31.....	89, 92
Dan. 11:45.....	89
Dan. 12:1.....	90
Dan. 12:1, 2.....	90
Dan. 12:2.....	65, 90, 98, 99, 101
Dan. 12:3.....	69
Dan. 12:7, 11.....	90
Dan. 12:11.....	89, 92

### Obadiah

Obad. 17-21.....	19
------------------	----

### Micah

Micah 4:2, 3.....	20
Micah 5:6.....	90

### Zechariah

Zech. 9:10.....	19
Zech. 14:3, 9, 16.....	21

### Matthew

Matt. 1:20.....	109
Matt. 4:23.....	101
Matt. 5:3.....	101
Matt. 5:5.....	32, 81, 99, 101
Matt. 5:38-48.....	79
Matt. 6:33.....	101
Matt. 7:21-27.....	72, 110
Matt. 8:11.....	101
Matt. 9:35.....	101
Matt. 11:5.....	34

Matt. 12:19, 20..... 38  
 Matt. 13:19...69, 84, 102, 105, 106,  
 111  
 Matt. 13:43.....69, 111  
 Matt. 13:51..... 112  
 Matt. 13:52..... 111  
 Matt. 16:15-17..... 60  
 Matt. 16:21..... 109  
 Matt. 19:27, 28..... 70  
 Matt. 19:28.... 13, 35, 39, 40, 42, 50  
 Matt. 20:21..... 34  
 Matt. 22:41-45..... 50  
 Matt. 24:3..... 87  
 Matt. 24:8..... 111  
 Matt. 24:13..... 104  
 Matt. 24:14..... 100, 101  
 Matt. 24:15..... 87, 92  
 Matt. 24:15, 16..... 86  
 Matt. 24:15, 29, 30..... 89  
 Matt. 24:21..... 87, 90  
 Matt. 24:25..... 87  
 Matt. 24:29..... 87, 90  
 Matt. 24:30, 31..... 87, 90  
 Matt. 24:37-39..... 58  
 Matt. 25:31..... 35, 39, 70  
 Matt. 26:13..... 101  
 Matt. 27:57..... 33  
 Matt. 28:19..... 95  
 Matt. 28:19, 20..... 97, 101, 103

**Mark**

Mark 1:14, 15..16, 69, 70, 101, 102  
 Mark 4:11, 12..... 69, 102, 107  
 Mark 4:11-13..... 107  
 Mark 4:14..... 105  
 Mark 4:34..... 112  
 Mark 8:35-38..... 72  
 Mark 8:38..... 102  
 Mark 10:40..... 34  
 Mark 10:42-45..... 34  
 Mark 12:28-34..... 78  
 Mark 13:14..... 87  
 Mark 13:32..... 52

**Luke**

Luke 1:1-4..... 24  
 Luke 1:32..... 109  
 Luke 1:32, 33..... 18, 24, 32  
 Luke 1:35..... 73, 109  
 Luke 1:43..... 103  
 Luke 2:11..... 103  
 Luke 2:25..... 33  
 Luke 2:38..... 33  
 Luke 3:21..... 97  
 Luke 4:18, 19..... 22  
 Luke 4:43..... 53, 68, 72, 82, 101  
 Luke 5:1..... 84  
 Luke 8:11..... 84, 105, 106  
 Luke 8:12..... 107  
 Luke 8:15..... 104, 106  
 Luke 9:2, 60..... 101  
 Luke 9:11..... 104  
 Luke 12:32..... 32, 70  
 Luke 13:28, 29..... 101  
 Luke 18:17..... 107  
 Luke 18:31-34..... 72  
 Luke 19:11..... 36  
 Luke 19:15, 17..... 70  
 Luke 19:17..... 32, 36  
 Luke 19:27..... 36  
 Luke 21:31..... 56, 87  
 Luke 22:16, 18..... 35  
 Luke 22:18..... 35, 39  
 Luke 22:20..... 100  
 Luke 22:28-30..... 13, 40, 70, 112,  
 114  
 Luke 22:29, 30..... 34, 52, 99  
 Luke 23:42..... 34  
 Luke 23:50, 51..... 33  
 Luke 24:39..... 46  
 Luke 24:47..... 101, 102

**John**

John 1:41, 49..... 61  
 John 3:3..... 106  
 John 3:3, 5..... 55  
 John 3:5..... 97  
 John 3:22..... 95  
 John 3:36..... 96  
 John 4:1..... 97

John 4:1, 2..... 95  
 John 4:24..... 73  
 John 5:24..... 105, 108, 110  
 John 5:28, 29..... 65  
 John 5:44..... 78  
 John 6:63.....104, 108  
 John 6:68..... 69  
 John 8:28..... 103  
 John 12:44-50..... 72, 110  
 John 13:35..... 79  
 John 14:9..... 103  
 John 15:19..... 79  
 John 16:9..... 69  
 John 17:3..... 78, 82  
 John 17:17..... 106  
 John 20:31..... 60, 78

**Acts**

Acts 1:3.....46, 53, 112  
 Acts 1:3, 6..... 52  
 Acts 1:5..... 52  
 Acts 1:6 ..... 13, 42, 52, 53, 54, 112,  
 114  
 Acts 1:6, 7..... 52  
 Acts 1:7..... 52  
 Acts 1:9-11..... 46  
 Acts 2:34, 35..... 59  
 Acts 2:38..... 96  
 Acts 3:20, 21 ..... 50  
 Acts 3:21..... 13, 22, 51, 59, 113  
 Acts 3:22..... 59  
 Acts 7:37..... 59  
 Acts 8:12 .....68, 69, 71, 72, 82, 96,  
 108  
 Acts 10:41..... 46  
 Acts 10:47, 48 ..... 96  
 Acts 19:1-7..... 95  
 Acts 19:5..... 96  
 Acts 19:8..... 68  
 Acts 20:24, 25 ..... 109  
 Acts 20:25..... 72  
 Acts 24:14, 15 ..... 21  
 Acts 26:5-8..... 21  
 Acts 28:23, 31 .... 68, 70, 71, 72, 82  
 Acts 28:30, 31 ..... 104

**Romans**

Rom. 1:1, 2 ..... 21  
 Rom. 1:5 ..... 97  
 Rom. 1:16 ..... 108  
 Rom. 4:13 ..... 31  
 Rom. 4:16 .....81, 100  
 Rom. 6:3, 4 ..... 97  
 Rom. 6:17 ..... 96  
 Rom. 8:22, 23..... 55  
 Rom. 8:24 ..... 104  
 Rom. 10:9 ..... 97  
 Rom. 10:17 ..... 110  
 Rom. 13:11 ..... 104  
 Rom. 15:8 .....31, 53  
 Rom. 16:20 ..... 57  
 Rom. 16:25, 26..... 21  
 Rom. 16:26 ..... 97

**1 Corinthians**

1 Cor. 1:18 ..... 104  
 1 Cor. 6:2, 9 ..... 70  
 1 Cor. 8:4-6..... 78  
 1 Cor. 15:1-4..... 71  
 1 Cor. 15:2 ..... 104  
 1 Cor. 15:3 .....71, 109  
 1 Cor. 15:18, 20..... 64  
 1 Cor. 15:22 ..... 90  
 1 Cor. 15:22, 23.....64, 91  
 1 Cor. 15:23 ..... 98

**2 Corinthians**

2 Cor. 4:4 .....49, 55, 57  
 2 Cor. 5:20 ..... 79  
 2 Cor. 6:18 ..... 55

**Galatians**

Gal. 1:4 ..... 55  
 Gal. 1:8, 9 ..... 104  
 Gal. 3:2 .....107, 108  
 Gal. 3:8 .....21, 100  
 Gal. 3:16 .....80, 100  
 Gal. 3:27 ..... 97  
 Gal. 3:29 ..... 80  
 Gal. 4:23 ..... 107  
 Gal. 4:29 ..... 107  
 Gal. 6:16 ..... 79

**Ephesians**

Eph. 1:13.....104, 107  
 Eph. 1:14..... 105

**Philippians**

Phil. 2:5-8 ..... 34  
 Phil. 3:3..... 79

**Colossians**

Col. 1:4, 5 ..... 108  
 Col. 1:5 ..... 108  
 Col. 1:6 ..... 108  
 Col. 1:13 ..... 55  
 Col. 2:12 ..... 97  
 Col. 3:11 ..... 80

**1 Thessalonians**

1 Thess. 2:13 .....104, 108  
 1 Thess. 4:17 ..... 90  
 1 Thess. 5:10 ..... 64, 90

**2 Thessalonians**

2 Thess. 1:7, 8 ..... 58, 89  
 2 Thess. 2:1-12 ..... 88  
 2 Thess. 2:5 ..... 88  
 2 Thess. 2:7-10..... 89  
 2 Thess. 2:8 ..... 90, 91  
 2 Thess. 2:9 ..... 89  
 2 Thess. 2:10-12 ..... 89

**1 Timothy**

1 Tim. 2:5.....78, 103  
 1 Tim. 6:3.....102, 108

**2 Timothy**

2 Tim. 1:10..... 98  
 2 Tim. 2:12..... 70  
 2 Tim. 3:13..... 58

**Titus**

Titus 1:2..... 21  
 Titus 3:4, 5 ..... 108  
 Titus 3:5..... 97

**Hebrews**

Heb. 1:5 ..... 59  
 Heb. 2:3 ..... 108  
 Heb. 2:3, 5 ..... 112  
 Heb. 2:5 ..... 109  
 Heb. 2:5, 8 ..... 112  
 Heb. 11:9 .....81, 100  
 Heb. 11:13, 39.....81, 101

**James**

James 1:18 .....55, 106  
 James 1:21 ..... 106

**1 Peter**

1 Pet. 1:23 ..... 106  
 1 Pet. 1:23-25 .....84, 106  
 1 Pet. 1:25 ..... 106  
 1 Pet. 3:20-21 ..... 97  
 1 Pet. 3:21 ..... 96

**2 Peter**

2 Pet. 3:18 ..... 70

**1 John**

1 John 2:22..... 61  
 1 John 3:8 ..... 57  
 1 John 3:9 ..... 107  
 1 John 5:1 ..... 61  
 1 John 5:19.....55, 57

**2 John**

2 John 7-9 ..... 102

**Jude**

Jude 3 ..... 84

**Revelation**

Rev. 1:1 ..... 43  
 Rev. 1:3 ..... 93  
 Rev. 2:18..... 39  
 Rev. 2:25-27 ..... 39  
 Rev. 2:26..... 37, 40, 51, 114  
 Rev. 3:21.....39, 40, 52, 71, 114  
 Rev. 5:10..... 32, 40, 61, 71, 81, 99  
 Rev. 10:6..... 99  
 Rev. 11:2, 3..... 90

*Scripture Index* 119

Rev. 11:15.....	90	Rev. 20:4.....	71, 91
Rev. 12:5.....	37	Rev. 20:5.....	91
Rev. 12:6, 14.....	90	Rev. 20:6.....	23, 91
Rev. 12:9.....	55	Rev. 20:9.....	99
Rev. 13:5.....	90	Rev. 22:18, 19.....	93
Rev. 19:15.....	38	Rev. 22:7.....	93
Rev. 20:1-6.....	40, 57, 61	Rev. 22:20.....	114

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