

Alert and Alarm!

What Is Christianity?

by Anthony Buzzard

Amos 8:12 reads: “People will stagger from sea to sea, and from the north around to the east. They will wander about looking for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it.”

This reminds us of Jesus’ own question: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find the Faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8).

The truth of what Amos wrote and Jesus pondered is apparently and urgently relevant to our present time. Use this article to check yourself. Are you clear about what Christianity as taught by Jesus (and the rest of the Bible) really is? The first question to all would-be believers is, **“What is the Gospel as Jesus preached it to us?”** What did Jesus teach us about being saved, gaining immortality, living literally for ever? Does that sound like an important issue?!

What am I supposed to understand and believe, in order to be a genuine believer in and follower of Jesus? You might think that following the words, teachings and Gospel of Jesus Christ would be the **obvious basis for true Christian faith**. But leading evangelical scholars say “No, it is not!” Please read and ponder the following amazing quotations from leading evangelicals. **Yes, please be suitably shocked**, and zealous to change this! We are all commanded by Jesus to be involved in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20), teaching as true Christianity the teachings of Jesus, the Christ. Correct? But now listen to this:

Dr. James Kennedy of Coral Ridge Ministries (he died in 2007):

“Many people today think that the essence of Christianity is the teachings of Jesus. That isn’t so. The teachings of Jesus are somewhat secondary to Christianity. If you read the epistles of the apostle Paul, which make up about half of the New Testament, you’ll see almost nothing whatsoever said about the teachings of Jesus. Not one of his parables is mentioned. In fact, throughout the rest of the New Testament there’s little reference to the teachings of Jesus. In the Apostles’ creed, the most universally held Christian creed, there is no reference to the teachings of Jesus or to the example of Jesus. In fact, in recounting Christ’s earthly life, the creed states simply that He was ‘born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and was buried.’ It mentions only two days in Jesus’s life — that of His birth and that of His death. **Christianity centers not in the teachings of Jesus but in the person of Jesus as the incarnate God who came into the**

world to take upon himself our guilt and to die in our place.”¹

This is a huge falsehood, since Paul preached the same Gospel of the Kingdom as did Jesus, to all; see for Jesus and Paul and Philip Acts 1:3, 1:6; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; **20:24-25**; 28:23, 31.

What do you think of this amazing statement? Would you be taken in by the following? Dr. Harold O.J. Brown:

“Christianity takes its name from its founder, or rather from what he was called, the Christ. Buddhism is also named for its founder. And non-Moslems often call Islam Mohammedanism. But while Buddhism and Islam are based primarily on the *teaching* of the Buddha and Mohammed, respectively, **Christianity is based primarily on the person of Christ. The Christian faith is not belief in his teaching**, but in what is taught **about him**. The appeal of Protestant liberals to ‘believe as Jesus believed,’ rather than to believe in Jesus, is a dramatic transformation of the fundamental nature of Christianity.”² That is a colossal lie. You are instructed by this very misleading preacher not to believe in Jesus and not to believe his teaching!

Now the very famous C.S. Lewis. Lewis denies Jesus while claiming to follow him! He wrote:

“The **Gospels are not ‘the gospel,’** the statement of the Christian belief.”³

Do you grasp what he says here? So then the words of Jesus, according to Lewis, are not the Gospel! This must be the ultimate falsehood, the ultimate deception. So then Jesus has to be rescued from “church”!

Remember that the four gospels make up about half of the whole New Testament! They are dedicated to what Jesus taught as the saving Gospel.

Dr. James Dunn observes that the words of Jesus really do not count for some commentators:

“Hurtado does not think it necessary for Jesus to have thought and spoken of himself in the same terms as his followers thought and spoke of him in the decades subsequent to his crucifixion, in order for the convictions of those followers to be treated as valid by Christians today; though he also notes that most Christians probably think that there was ‘some degree of continuity’ between what Jesus thought of himself and subsequent Christology.”⁴

Has Hurtado read the New Testament?!

Now some wise, discerning words from Professor of Evangelism Dr. Taber: “I was dismayed and amazed that **none of the nine writers on ‘What’s the Good News?’**

¹ D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *The Presence of a Hidden God*, 2008, chapter “How I Know Jesus Is God,” p. 82, emphasis added.

² *Heresies*, 1984, p. 13.

³ Introduction to J.B. Phillips’ *Letters to Young Churches*, p. 9-10.

⁴ *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus?* p. 93, fn 2.

mentioned the Kingdom of God” (Letter to *Christianity Today*, April, 2000). He was commenting on the fascinating article in *Christianity Today* of February, 2007: “What’s the Good News?”

How profoundly shocking and true was the observation of Professor Richard Hiers:

“Interpreters of Christian persuasion have ordinarily not been especially interested in what Jesus intended and did in his own time.”⁵ So then, one can profess Jesus without really knowing or caring what Jesus taught!

Let us unpack this disaster further, from a leading historian of Christianity. I would give this title to what he wrote: **How the Church Fathers Pronounced the Creed of Jesus to be Heresy and Error!**

Dr. H.A. Wolfson

“The Church Fathers’ conception of the Trinity was a combination of Jewish monotheism and pagan polytheism, except that to them this combination was a good combination. In fact, it was to them an **ideal combination of what is best in Jewish monotheism and of what is best in pagan polytheism**, and consequently they gloried in it and pointed to it as evidence of their belief. We have on this the testimony of Gregory of Nyssa, one of the great figures in the history of the philosophic formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. His words are repeated by John of Damascus, the last of the Church Fathers. The Christian conception of God, argues Gregory of Nyssa, is neither the polytheism of the Greeks nor the monotheism of the Jews, and consequently it must be true. ‘For the truth passes in the mean between these two conceptions, destroying each heresy, and yet accepting what is useful to it from each. **The Jewish dogma is destroyed** by the acceptance of the Word and by belief in the Spirit, while the polytheistic error of the Greek school is made to vanish by the unity of the nature abrogating this imagination of plurality’ (*Oration Catechetica*, 13).

“John of Damascus, the last of the church fathers, writes: ‘On the one hand, of the Jewish idea, we have the unity of God’s nature, and on the other of the Greek, we have the distinction of the hypostases [in the Trinity], and that only’ (*De Fide Ort.* 1, 7).”⁶

Another among many expert observers notes this: “No responsible New Testament scholar would claim that the doctrine of the Trinity was taught by Jesus, or preached by the earliest Christians, or consciously held by any writer in the New Testament.”⁷

Now some refreshing, scholarly comment. It is heartening to read honest, masterly believing commentary on Jesus and his Gospel of the Kingdom,

⁵ *Jesus and the Future*, 1981, p. 1.

⁶ Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, p. 361-363.

⁷ Dr. A.T. Hanson, *The Image of the Invisible God*, p. 87.

the Christian hope and the promise of peace on earth — Christ reigning with the saints.

Dr. Henry Alford on Revelation 20: “It will have long ago been anticipated by the reader of this commentary that I cannot consent to distort words from their plain sense and chronological place in the prophecy on account of any considerations of difficulty, or any risk of abuses which the **doctrine of the millennium** may bring with it. Those who lived next to the Apostles, and the whole church for 300 years, understood them in the plain literal sense; and it is a strange sight in these days to see expositors who are among the first in reverence for antiquity, complacently casting aside the most cogent instance of consensus which primitive antiquity presents. As regards the text itself, no legitimate treatment of it will extort what is known as the spiritual or amillennial interpretation now in fashion. If, in a passage where two resurrections are mentioned, where certain souls came to life at the first and the rest of the persons came to life only at the end of the specified period after the first — if in such a passage **the first resurrection** may be understood to mean spiritual rising with Christ, while the second means literal rising from the grave, **then there is an end of all significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything**. If the first resurrection is ‘spiritual,’ non-literal, then so is the second, which I suppose none will be hardy enough to maintain; but if the second is literal then so is the first, which in common with the whole primitive church and many of the best modern expositors, I do maintain, and receive it as an article of faith and hope.”⁸

The Gospel of God

Now back to our “alarm.” There is an alarming absence of Jesus from writings about Jesus! Jesus **without his Gospel of the Kingdom** is not the real Jesus. A person is defined by his acts and words. Let us now show that throughout the work of Jesus while he was here with us, and the work of all the NT writers, there is **one unifying Gospel**, called **God’s Gospel**. No authority is higher than that! Here are the real Jesus and his original followers at work. Let us start with Jesus, as he speaks to us. Mark 1:14-15: “Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, **preaching the Gospel of God** and saying, ‘The Kingdom of God is about to come, repent and **believe that Gospel**.’”

Observe carefully that the “Gospel of the Kingdom” is synonymous with the phrase “Gospel of God.” This is the Gospel of salvation emanating from the supreme authority in the universe.

Romans 1:1: “Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the **Gospel of God**.”

⁸ Alford, *Commentary on the Greek NT*, 1861, Vol. 5, p. 726.

Romans 15:16: God called Paul “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the **Gospel of God**, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”

2 Corinthians 11:7: “Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached the **Gospel of God** to you without charge?”

1 Thessalonians 2:2: “But after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the **Gospel of God** amid much opposition.”

1 Thessalonians 2:8: “Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the **Gospel of God** but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.”

1 Thessalonians 2:9: “For you recall, brothers and sisters, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the **Gospel of God**.”

1 Peter 4:17: “For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who **do not obey the Gospel of God?**”

We see then that the **Gospel of the Kingdom** (= the **Gospel of God**) is something to be heard, understood and *obeyed*. Jesus’ first ever command to us all is “Repent and believe the **Gospel of the Kingdom**” (Mark 1:14-15). Does that get your urgent attention?

Or have you somehow been sold the very false idea that the Gospel is not to be defined by Jesus? The easy, plain fact is that Paul preached the very same Gospel of the Kingdom of God as had Jesus (Acts 20:24-25, etc). True Christianity is to be solidly based on the words, work and Gospel-preaching — and of course death and resurrection — of Jesus.

Now consider the frank admission of a leading professor of evangelism, Dr. Mortimer Arias, Professor of Missiology:

“In the process of developing ‘kingdom evangelization’ lectures I was struck by certain findings that still puzzle and allure me.

“First finding: The gospel in the Gospels — Jesus’ good news — is none other than the ‘good news of the kingdom’...

“Second finding: The kingdom-of-God theme has practically disappeared from evangelistic preaching and has been ignored by traditional evangelism...Thousands of books are printed and circulated every year on evangelization; most of these fall into the category of methodology, the ‘how to’ manuals for Christians and churches. Not all of this activity or activism, however, is a sign of health or creativity...**‘The good news of the kingdom’ is not the usual way we describe the Gospel and evangelization...** We seem to be faced with what can be called an eclipse of the reign of God lasting from the

apostolic age to the present, particularly in our theology for evangelization.

“When I left the seminary the first time, **I had no clear idea of the Kingdom of God and I had no place in my theology for the second coming or Parousia...** I had no concerns about the future...It is obvious that our traditional mini-theologies of evangelization (‘the plan of salvation,’ or ‘four spiritual laws’ type of reduction) do not do justice to the whole gospel...The reign of God is God’s own dream, His project for his world and for humanity! He made us dreamers, and he wants us to be seduced by his dream and to dream with him...It is not we who dream but God who dreams in us.”⁹

Note now how many scholars correctly define the Kingdom of God, the heart and core of the biblical Gospel:

E. Haenchen: “The preaching of the Kingdom of God obviously refers to the Kingdom of God **which will begin with the Parousia [Second Coming]**.”¹⁰

Haenchen on Acts 28:23: “The Kingdom of God and the Name of Jesus Christ properly stand side by side. The second expression refers to the death and resurrection attested in the holy Scriptures and therefore the Messiahship of Jesus. **‘Kingdom of God’ itself describes the entire Christian proclamation.** So in 19:8, 20:25 and 1:3 it also has this meaning. If, on the other hand, as here and in **8:12** and 28:23, 31 it is mentioned along with the events of Jesus, then it has **the futuristic meaning** of which 14:22 speaks. **At the Parousia the future Kingdom will come with the returning Jesus (Luke 21:31).** Paul’s efforts to win the Jews lasted throughout the day. This shows how keen he was to win them.”¹¹

H.J. Cadbury, *Acts and Eschatology*: “Acts includes many familiar elements in NT preaching. **The preachers preach the Kingdom of God** or the things about it (Acts 1:3; 8:12; 20:25; 28:23, 31). The term Kingdom of God appears from almost the first verse to the last verse in the book. “Kingdom of God constitutes *a formula* apparently parallel to the writer’s more characteristic single verb ‘*evangelize*’...Nothing obviously distinguishes the term Kingdom of God in Acts from such **apocalyptic [to do with the spectacular future return of Jesus] use** as it has in the synoptic gospels. For example one enters it through much tribulation (Acts 14:22).”

Kevin Giles: “Luke’s understanding of the Kingdom of God is that **it is still in the future and it will mean the restoration of Israel.**” He goes on to quote J. Jervell (*Luke and the People of God*) who refers to the Apostles’ question about the restoration of

⁹ *Announcing the Reign of God*, 1984, p. xv, xii, xiii, 55, 85, 115-116, emphasis added.

¹⁰ *Acts of the Apostles*, 1971, p. 141, fn. 2.

¹¹ *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 773.

the Kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6) and says: “Luke’s theology anticipated a restored Israel.”¹²

Earle Ellis: “In Acts the term Kingdom of God is used **only of a future event**...The Kingdom will have a glorious and public manifestation **in the future**...Like the creative word in Genesis (1:3) **the word of the Kingdom** [cp. Matt. 13:19] contains within it the reality of the new creation itself. Nevertheless the Kingdom also remains **in the future and its coming is associated with the Parousia**, the glorious appearance of Jesus at the close of the age (Lk. 19:11; 22:29; 11:2; Acts 1:6, 11). Eternal life awaits the age to come (Luke 18:30). **By their response to the Kingdom message men reveal whether they are destined for the ‘life of the age to come’** (Acts 8:1-17; 13:46, 48).”¹³

Everything depends on our response to the Gospel Message about the Kingdom as Jesus preached it. The gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are themselves evangelism models, inviting us to repent and believe the Gospel about the **Kingdom** (Mark 1:14-15) as well as in Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Any subtraction from the Gospel is a serious and dangerous mistake. Jesus firmly insists on an intelligent grasp of God’s plan/Gospel of the Kingdom of God. Jesus makes grasping the Gospel of the Kingdom an essential requisite for repentance and forgiveness:

Jesus said: “If they were to perceive and understand [the **Gospel** about the Kingdom, Matt. 13:19], they would repent and be forgiven” (Mark 4:11-12).

Jesus’ first command and the basic thesis of all his Gospel teaching is:

“Repent [change your mind and life] and believe the Gospel about the **Kingdom of God** being at hand” (Mark 1:14-15). Everything else Jesus and the Apostles said is an expansion of this key, core concept.

Jesus also said that the Gospel of the Kingdom is so vital to salvation that “when anyone hears the **Gospel about the Kingdom [Matt. 13:19]**, the Devil comes and snatches away the **word** from his heart so that he may not believe it and **be saved**” (Luke 8:12). Luke used the code-word “word” for the Gospel of the Kingdom. This use of “word” for the Gospel is very frequent in the New Testament (see my *Our Fathers Who Aren’t in Heaven*, appendix, p. 359).

Paul was also a career preacher of **the Gospel of the Kingdom**, following Jesus his Lord (Acts **20:24-25**; 28:23, 31; 19:8; cp. Acts 8:12).

Christians are also commanded to preach that same Gospel of the Kingdom (Matt. 28:19-20; Luke 9:60). How well are we doing with this task? How well are you doing, if you cannot define the Gospel as Jesus did?

Who Was Jesus? A Little Book of Guidance by Dr. James D.G. Dunn reports how disastrously, and early on,

believers had abandoned belief in Jesus and his Gospel and teachings:

“Jesus’ ministry is in effect **replaced** in early Christian preaching by proclamation of Jesus’ death and resurrection. It is true that in his account of Christianity’s beginnings Luke does retain an emphasis on the kingdom of God — but he also hints that the message was easily misunderstood (Acts 1.6). And compared with Jesus, Paul makes relatively little reference to the kingdom of God.”

The Gospel accounts are very clear about the focus of Christ’s message. Yet the Gospel of the Kingdom of God is nearly absent from Christianity today.

Erik Jones observes:

“The myriad of churches that make up Christianity profess that their religion is based on Jesus Christ. Nearly all claim Him as their founder and say that their teachings are based on what He said and did 2,000 years ago. But, sadly, there are many doctrines where mainstream Christianity ignores or actually rejects the teachings of Jesus Christ.

“This month’s column makes a bold assertion: Mainstream Christianity does not teach the same message that Jesus Christ brought when He walked the earth 2,000 years ago.

“Jesus had a central message that formed the basis for His entire ministry and teachings. He pinpointed this central message in the heart of His most famous sermon — the Sermon on the Mount. He made a statement about what should be the highest priority for His followers: ‘But seek *first* the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you’ (Matthew 6:33, emphasis added).”

In an editorial in the journal *Missiology* Dr. Arthur F. Glasser says:

“Let me ask: 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 it is the rare pastor who tackles the subject.”¹⁴

The NT speaks of the Kingdom of God not just as “prophecy” or “eschatology,” as an “optional extra” (!), but as the saving Gospel itself. As George Ladd pointed out, “Society is divided into two antithetical classes: **those who hear and receive the word of the Kingdom and those who either do not know it or reject it.**”¹⁵

¹² *Reformed Theological Review*, Sept.-Dec., 1981

¹³ *Luke, New Century Bible*, p. 13.

¹⁴ *Missiology*, April, 1980, p. 134.

¹⁵ *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 48.

Professor B.T. Viviano observed, “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?”¹⁶

The key to what has gone so wrong is summarized in the following perceptive statement:

“The long and bitter controversy which led to the definition, in metaphysical terms, of the twofold nature of Christ. **Nothing seems to be more remote from the realities of the Christian faith than this dreary controversy**, but for the Greek mind everything was at stake in it...It is not surprising that modern writers have found a **crucial proof** that Christianity, in the course of the Gentile mission, had changed into a new religion. **The Church, while still calling itself by the name of Jesus, had forgotten or refused to know what he had actually taught**” (Prof. E.F. Scott).¹⁷

I trust that the information above will intensify your interest in defining the Gospel of the Kingdom as Jesus preached it, and thus defining the original Christianity of our New Testament. ✧

¹⁶ *The Kingdom of God in History*, 1988, p. 9.

¹⁷ *The Kingdom of God in the New Testament*, p. 156.