Redefining God and the Gospel

In this Winter edition of A JOURNAL FROM THE RADICAL REFORMATION, we bring to the readers’ attention a portion of the anti-Trinitarian treatise by the Harvard theologian Andrews Norton (1786-1853). We believe that many of his arguments have not been met by Trinitarians. Proponents of traditional orthodoxy often appeal to “mystery” in their defense of what many 19th-century unitarian theologians saw as logical flaws in the Nicene view of the Godhead. Andrews Norton has long been out of print, but his protest against the doctrine of the Trinity provides a perennial challenge to orthodoxy.

Our second concern is with the content of the gospel. Contemporary evangelism continues to lack the eschatological element which is so marked in Jesus’ and the apostles’ presentation of the saving message. In October 1983, we received an encouraging letter from a leading American New Testament scholar, who wrote: “I agree with you that the Christian gospel needs a strong dose of kingdom eschatology to conform to the New Testament message. The right kind of eschatology seems to be missing in much current preaching, the wrong kind of eschatology—escapist in appeal—unfortunately present.”

The absence of a future dimension in the gospel is exposed by the Lausanne Conference’s (1974) definition of what it means to preach the gospel:

“To evangelize is to preach the Good News that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that as reigning Lord he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gift of the Spirit to all who repent and believe.”

That definition, we suggest, fails to do justice to the New Testament content of the gospel. There is no reference anywhere to the future. There is no kingdom eschatology, no statement of the objective of the Christian venture, which is the inheritance of the kingdom of God at the return of Christ.

We suggest a revised definition of evangelism along these lines:

“To evangelize is to spread the Good News that God has planned as the goal of history to establish the kingdom of God on earth when Jesus returns; that Jesus now offers forgiveness through his death and resurrec-