

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-

tion to all who believe the message, the promise of the Spirit to those who obey him, and an invitation to all who respond to the Good News of the kingdom to prepare for positions of responsibility with Jesus in the kingdom."

This definition, reflecting Jesus' own emphasis on the kingdom of God as the heart of the gospel, insures that a goal, an ultimate hope, is established from the start in the mind of the convert. We suspect that Greek notions about the departure of the soul to heaven have tended to obscure the New Testament vision of the triumph of the saints through a corporate resurrection into the kingdom of God, destined to be inaugurated on earth at the *parousia*. A vision of the future was contained in the New Testament gospel: "of this hope you have already heard in the word of the truth of the gospel" (Col. 1:5). The New Testament *kerygma* contains more than a statement about the death and resurrection of Christ. Romans 10:9, 10 should not be read in a way that contradicts the gospel as it came from the lips of Jesus. Our article on Romans 10:6-17 proposes that we read between the lines of Paul's argument and supply for ourselves the eschatological dimension presupposed by Paul.

Our third article will be of interest to historians of 19th-century Adventism. The struggle for the recovery of New Testament eschatology in the 19th century was hampered by some lamentable infighting among some who demanded conformity to their over-narrow systems. Mark Mattison documents the battle between John Thomas and Joseph Marsh over the issue of rebaptism. The impact of the rediscovery of truth is weakened when doctrinal disagreement degenerates into personal vendetta.