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## DEFINING THE KINGDOM AND THE GOSPEL

"It may be said that the teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God represents his whole teaching. It is the main, determinative subject of all his discourse. His ethics were ethics of the Kingdom; his theology was theology of the Kingdom; his teaching regarding himself cannot be understood apart from his interpretation of the Kingdom of God" (Dr. F. C. Grant, from "The Gospel of the Kingdom," *Biblical World*, 50, pp. 121-191).

"This is our first basic thesis about Jesus: He did not preach about Himself, or simply about God, but about the Kingdom of God" (Dr. John Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 60).

According to the records of Jesus' ministry, the pioneer of the Christian faith, Jesus, gave a definite label to the Christian Gospel. He called it, quite specifically, "the Gospel (Good News) about the

Kingdom of God." In Luke 16:16 Jesus remarked that since the time of John the Baptist (Matt. 3:2) "the Gospel of the Kingdom of God has been proclaimed." The Gospel of the Kingdom of God is another way of describing Christianity or the Christian religion. "Kingdom of God" is the term in which the genius of the Christian faith is concentrated.

But you could easily miss this central and fundamental point, if you listened to

contemporary versions of the Gospel. The vocabulary of modern proponents of Christianity and the Gospel avoids this basic vocabulary of Jesus. When is the last time you heard on radio, television or from the pulpit, the words "Gospel of (or about) the Kingdom"? Certainly the word Gospel is not in short supply, and the word Kingdom is heard, if fairly rarely. But the biblical description, in Matthew, Mark and Luke, of Jesus' saving Gospel — the Gospel about the Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven — is almost extinct.<sup>1</sup>

This should put us on the alert. When words are changed or suppressed, ideas are changed or lost. The words of Jesus, however, are the most precious of all words and their loss means the loss of the Christian faith itself. This does not mean that people will cease to talk about Christianity, but it does mean that when they do they risk defining it in a way different from Jesus. At that point, the name remains, but the substance of the faith is distorted or perverted.

Paul knew how important it was to maintain the ideas and words of Jesus: Writing to his young delegate Timothy, Paul said: "If anyone teaches otherwise and does not agree with the health-giving words — the words of our Lord Jesus Christ — and teaching which is in accordance with true religion, he is blind...." (1 Tim. 6:3).

The most obvious way in which Christians could guard against losing the words of Jesus and thus abandoning the mind and spirit of Jesus would be to adopt quite consciously and deliberately as a constant habit of speech: "The Gospel of the Kingdom."

In our second issue of "Focus on the Kingdom," we listed all the various phrases describing the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Kingdom of God and Kingdom of Heaven are exactly equivalent, with no difference in meaning. Only Matthew uses the title Kingdom of Heaven.

Christian Gospel and traced them all back to the "parent text" which originated with Jesus himself. No less than 18 times in Matthew, Mark and Luke and Acts (both before and after the cross) the full and definitive expression "Gospel about the Kingdom of God" appears. It will be useful to remind ourselves of these basic verses. They bring before us the main topic around which Christianity revolves (note that in the original Greek "proclaiming" and "preaching" imply the Gospel): "THE GOSPEL ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF GOD" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17, 23; 24:14; 9:35; Luke 4:43; 8:1; 9:2, 6, 11, 60; 10:9; 16:16; Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31)

A leading contemporary evangelist made an extraordinarily interesting observation at a conference of world evangelists in 1974. He said, "How much have you heard here at the conference about the Kingdom of God? Not much. But it was Jesus' prime concern." Ponder the meaning of this amazing statement. "Here we are," Michael Green said in effect, "as leaders in the field of Christian evangelism, and we do not sound like Jesus. He always talked about the Kingdom as the Gospel, but we do not."

Words are the expression of the heart and mind. A person is, in a sense, his mind. Is it not rather disconcerting that leading exponents of the Christian faith admit that their concerns in regard to the saving Gospel are strangely different from those of Jesus? The situation suggests that all is not well. I have a tape in which another leading evangelical scholar dedicated two hours to defining the Gospel. The Kingdom of God received hardly a mention in the discussion. And when the speaker appealed to Paul's wonderful farewell statement about his ministry in Acts 20, he skipped from verse 24 to 26, omitting verse 25 where Paul defined the "Gospel of the grace of God" (no one avoids that phrase!) as the "proclamation of the KINGDOM." An intelligent analysis of these facts will suggest that something has gone awry with modern attempts to present Jesus and his saving Gospel.

Some of our readers may know that there is a theory which has been very popular in America in some circles, which tries to justify the clear absence of Jesus' "Kingdom-Gospel" language in contemporary preaching, by saying that Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom is *not* the saving Gospel for us now.<sup>2</sup> We would like to urge our readers to examine this most carefully. We suggest that such a theory, which would separate Jesus from his own Gospel, is without a shred of supporting evidence in the New Testament. It is a man-made device which confuses and complicates the consistent "One-Gospel" of the New Testament (beautifully defined, for example, in Acts 8:12).

If Jesus spoke of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and made this the key for an intelligent reception of himself and his message, what is the Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven? The Kingdom of God was a phrase well known to Jesus and his audience. The Kingdom of God was the national hope of Israel. It had been described in detail in the books of the Hebrew prophets (the Old Testament — actually "the Hebrew Bible"). Jesus did not play verbal games with his audience. He did not come into Galilee calling for repentance and belief in the Gospel about the Kingdom (Mark 1:14, 15) intending his audience to misunderstand his words! Common sense and honesty dictate that Jesus expected the audience to know what the Kingdom of God was. Jesus did not define the Kingdom. There was no need to do this. The Kingdom of God meant "God's revolutionary Government" to be inaugurated by the promised Messiah on a renewed earth. (The Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven certainly did not mean a realm of disembodied postmortem spirits in Heaven.) The Kingdom of God was a coming event, and a very spectacular one. It spelled destruction for the wicked and joy and endless life for the true followers of the Messiah.

The New Testament lays out this basic definition of the Kingdom for us in Matthew chapter 3. John the Baptist commands repentance in view of the approach of the Kingdom ("The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, repent!" 3:2). What this means is clarified when John goes on to announce the two possible destinies for mankind: either to be welcomed as "wheat" into the "barn" of the Kingdom, or, alternatively, to be burned up like chaff in the consuming fire of judgment at the Messiah's arrival. The Message is more than clear —

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>See, for example, the notes in the Scofield reference Bible on Rev. 14:6. According to the extraordinary comment the Gospel of the Kingdom is a thing of the past and the future but not of the present! The theory interferes with the Great Commission in which Jesus knew of only one Gospel to be preached continuously until he returns.

either **the Barn or the Bonfire**. **Choose!** The choice is laid before us in this Gospel about the Kingdom. Jesus came with the same fundamental Gospel Message of the Kingdom. Matthew makes this clear to us by describing the Christian faith/Gospel with the same terminology for Jesus as for his forerunner cousin John: "From that time on Jesus began to make a public proclamation, The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17; 9:35; cp. 3:2).

It is essential not to lose sight of this ABC teaching about the Christian Gospel. There are misleading forces around trying to wrench Jesus' Gospel message from its New Testament, Jewish environment and dissolve it into something else, a vague exhortation to "be good and go to heaven when you die." This is foreign to Jesus and the New Testament. What Jesus required was a response to his message about the Kingdom. Response requires an intelligent understanding of what is put before the potential convert. How can one "Repent and believe in the Gospel of the Kingdom" (Mark 1:14, 15) if one has a very hazy, or perhaps mistaken idea of what Jesus meant by the Kingdom?

"In the New Testament the Kingdom of God is conceived, first of all, as something in the future" (Dr. E Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark*, p. 45).

Commitment to Jesus, receiving Jesus, coming to Christ is defined in the New Testament as intelligently and repentantly receiving the Message/Gospel of Jesus — the word(s) of Jesus. It is possible to miss this point if one speaks only of "coming to Christ," "receiving Christ," "believing in Christ." Receiving Christ means receiving his words. Now the New Testament uses both types of language: "receiving Christ" and "receiving the words of Christ." The one defines the other. "Receiving Christ" is not possible apart from the reception of his words/teaching/Gospel. Jesus, in other words, is defined by his words (aren't we all?).

A Jesus without his defining Gospel easily becomes a vague symbol of salvation, a non-descript, loving personality who is not clearly the Messiah-Savior, Kingdom-Gospel preacher of the New Testament documents. We should never forget that Satan's great trick is to present "other Jesuses." Satan is very happy to have the word "Jesus" in circulation, but very unhappy with the actual, historical Jesus who

came armed with the saving weapon — the Gospel of the Kingdom, plus of course (later) the vital facts about his death and resurrection.

Jesus spelled out the "mechanics" of conversion, the entrance upon the journey to salvation, in his famous parable of the seed (or the sower). According to Jesus, the Master evangelist, the essential seed (seed is necessary for rebirth) which must take root and germinate in the heart of the believer is this: "The WORD/GOSPEL of the Kingdom." Here are Jesus' critically important words:

Describing evangelism "Jesus-style," Matthew records the Messiah: "Whenever someone hears the WORD about the KINGDOM...the Devil comes and snatches away the seed which has been sown in his heart" (Matt. 13:19). So the key to salvation is the reception of the word of the Kingdom, Jesus' favorite topic. (And no wonder, because he says that the destiny of man is wrapped up in his reception or nonreception of the Gospel of the Kingdom.) The Devil understands Jesus' program and system evangelism/salvation, and he mounts his massive (and clever) counter-program, to ensure to the maximum that the Gospel of the Kingdom, the vital seed which sparks the new birth, does not remain in the heart of the potential convert. Better still, the Devil would like to see the Message suppressed altogether and some sort of counterfeit put in its place. Jesus provided a brilliant, "consumer activist" intelligence report when he made this fascinating observation: "When anyone hears the Message/Gospel, the Devil snatches away the Message which has been sown in his heart, so that he may not believe it AND BE SAVED" (Luke 8:12).

Can anyone deny that the key to salvation is revealed here? No wonder that Jesus in this context (Luke 8:8) would "raise his voice" and urge, "those who have ears to hear, let them hear." Immortality in the Kingdom of God was at stake, and Jesus strained every nerve in his body to get the vital saving information across. He was involved, as are all evangelists, in a cosmic struggle with the Ruler of this Age, the God of this Age, whose power of deception should never be underestimated. (Paul understood, and passionately preached that "loving the Truth" was essential for successful Christianity, II Thess. 2:10.)\$\\$

# John, Why Did You Write Your Gospel?

#### by Charles Hunting

If John had intended to introduce a preexistent divine being in the person of Jesus the Messiah, why, asks the German theologian Karl-Josef Kuschel,<sup>3</sup> did he not begin his prologue as follows?

In the beginning was *the Son* and *the Son* was with God and *the Son* was God.

Certainly the cornerstone of traditional views of the Godhead would be on much firmer ground if *the Son* had been a feature of the eternal past. But what John in fact wrote is this:

"In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God."

Hear Professor Kuschel answer his opening question: "The answer is that the author is evidently not interested in reflecting more closely on the relations between God and this Son in preexistence." He notes that the word "Son" is *first* mentioned in verse fourteen of the prologue. The Son for John begins in history, not eternity. Kuschel observes that after John 1:14 John speaks in the Gospel *only* of the Son and not the preexisting word. It is this *word* which (not "who") became a human being This is well within the scope of Paul's short history of Jesus in 1 Timothy 3:16: "And by common confession great is the mystery of godliness:

He who was revealed in the flesh, Was vindicated in the Spirit, Beheld by angels, Proclaimed among the nations, Believed on in the world, Taken up in glory."

John and Paul recognize Jesus as one who was first revealed as the human Son of God. Jesus is what the word became. But a word does not begin as a person. It is a thought, an idea, a promise, an expression; it conveys meaning. (In all of its thousands of

occurrences in the Old Testament "word" never means a person.) In his prologue John reflects on the cosmic significance of Jesus. Jesus the Messiah, to be born in the family of David, was the starting point of all that God planned for the fulfillment of His creative activity. God's King appointed to rule over the nations and save the world was the reason and occasion for the Genesis creation. The word of promise was in the beginning in God's mind. It belonged to God, a single being unique in all the universe — it was His word brought in the fulness of time to fulfillment in the Messiah. "All things were originally made through *it [the word]*" (John 1:3).

Why did John write his gospel? It was to recall this fundamental Christian truth which was already under attack in the first century. God's self-expressive activity took form as the human Son of God, Jesus the Messiah appointed to speak God's last word to the world. John wrote to rehearse that truth, a truth which skeptics were already trying to distort by denying Jesus' status as the human Son of God.

John dedicates his entire gospel to the singular purpose of reestablishing Jesus' true identity. Note carefully John's specific purpose statement: "But these things have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

Here is the revealing of the mystery of godliness known equally to Peter: "Who do you say that I am?" "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" (Matt. 16:16). Jesus congratulated Peter for his discerning insight, revealed by "my Father who is in heaven." No mention was made of a preexistent eternal Son in Peter's answer. The Christology of the giants of original Christianity insists on belief that Jesus was the Christ and Son of God. And to be "Son of God" in the Bible is a claim not to *be* God, but God's special agent and commissioner. \$\displace\$

"It is a common but patent misreading of the opening of John's Gospel to read it as if it said: 'In the beginning was the Son, and the Son was with God and the Son was God' (John 1:1)" (Professor Colin Brown, "Trinity and Incarnation: In search of Contemporary Orthodoxy," *Ex Auditu*, Vol 7, 1991, p. 89).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Born Before All Time? The Debate About the Origin of Christ, Crossroad, 1992.

# Defining the Gospel of the Kingdom from Matthew

It is an unarguable fact that Jesus was the bearer of the Gospel or Good News about the Kingdom of God/Heaven (the two phrases are identical in meaning). "Kingdom of God" is the master-term in Jesus' presentation of the Christian faith. It is his constant slogan, the concept around which all of his discourse revolves. "Kingdom of God" is the phrase in which the genius of the faith is concentrated. Jesus bared his mind and the fundamental intention of his whole career as prophet, rabbi and Son of God with these precious words, which should be indelibly written on the hearts of his followers:

"I am bound to preach the Gospel about the Kingdom of God to the other cities also: That is the reason why God sent me" (Luke 4:43). Logically, then, the same driving purpose should animate all Christian evangelism.

Yet, strangely, the phrase "Gospel of the Kingdom of God" is absent from the lips of nearly all contemporary attempts to "preach salvation." Something is seriously amiss. This discrepancy was noted also by a leading church planter: "I cannot help wondering why I have not heard more about the Kingdom of God in the thirty years I have been a Christian. I certainly have read about it enough in the Bible.... 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?",4

No one, therefore, should be faulted for calling attention to this amazing phenomenon: Jesus' central concern in evangelism is blatantly absent from the vocabulary of those whose job it is to represent him.

Our language as exponents and teachers of the Christian faith had better be the language of Jesus. Language reflects mind. And Christians claim to have, by virtue of the holy spirit, "the mind of Christ" (I Cor. 2:16).

If we grant then that the Kingdom of God is the heart of the saving Message (Mark 1:14, 15; cp. Matt. 13:19; Luke 8:12), the reasonable and necessary question is: "What is the Kingdom?"

A good place to examine the question is at the beginning of the New Testament, though an approach from the Old Testament would be equally valid and valuable. For the moment, let us start with Matthew. When, what and where is the Kingdom? A cloud of fog and confusion has settled over many Bible students in regard to defining the Kingdom. But this need not be: In the Lord's prayer, we are invited to approach God with the words "May Your Kingdom come." This point of reference is familiar to the least instructed, and its force should not be missed. You do not pray for something to come, if it has already come! The petition is positively not, "May Your Kingdom grow," nor "May Your Kingdom spread." The request is for the future arrival of the Kingdom, meaning of course, that in the sense indicated by Jesus in the "Lord's prayer," the Kingdom had not yet come.

An excellent Old Testament base for just such a future coming of the Kingdom is found in Micah 4:7, 8. In that passage the prophet announces that the Kingdom will yet *come* to Mount Zion, and it will be a return to a former, lost condition, a restoration of dominion which has been taken away from Jerusalem: "The Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion and henceforth forever. And you, tower of the flock, the stronghold of the daughter of Zion, to you it is going to *come*, namely the former dominion: the KINGDOM will *come* to the daughter of Jerusalem."

A clear basis indeed for the request: "Thy Kingdom *come*"! And the Kingdom is a concrete empire based on a geographical location — Jerusalem, which Jesus called "the city of the Great King" (Matt. 5:35).

Again, in Matthew, the Kingdom is the great and decisive event of *the future*: "Not everyone who says to me, 'lord, lord' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven/God; but only he who does my Heavenly Father's will. Many will say to me *in that day...*" (Matt. 7:21, 22). The linkage is clear. Jesus' words rivet together the concept of Kingdom and "in that (future) day." The Kingdom belongs in the mind of Christ to the day of God's future intervention and judgment on the world. The Kingdom is the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Peter Wagner, in *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel*, p. 2.

magnificent, decisive and (for the wicked) catastrophic interposition of divine authority to right the wrongs of our present rebel world. The Kingdom comes (in this passage) with the future coming of Jesus and not before.

Now for a third testimony: Matthew 8:11, 12: "Many will come [note the verb in the future tense] from the East and West and will sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven/God, but the children of the Kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness: there will be weeping and grinding of teeth."

Once again the setting and the timing of the Kingdom are unmistakable. The Kingdom belongs to the future as an event which will divide the good from the bad, and their destinies will be fixed. "The children of the Kingdom" are here those who by virtue of their privileged position as members of the Israelite race *should have* been candidates for successful entry into the Kingdom when it comes. But tragically, they will not have accepted the Messiah and his Gospel-of-the-Kingdom Message. They will not have believed the Gospel of the Kingdom from the lips of the Messiah, nor spread the fire of its saving message to others. And they will be barred entrance into the Kingdom "in that day."

These three passages found early in the Gospel of Matthew are sufficient to set the pattern of Kingdom teaching which pervades Jesus' preaching career. The Kingdom is yet to come. It will be the momentous event of the future for which all are invited to prepare now with utmost urgency — in terms equally of proper, Bible-informed, belief system and proper conduct.

The Gospel of salvation, as it fell from the lips of Jesus, is to the Kingdom as an invitation is to a banquet. The Gospel is to the Kingdom as the sowing of seed is to the harvest. And it leads only to confusion, if we muddle these simple facts. An invitation is not the banquet itself, and the sowing of seed is not the harvest. The primary and dominant meaning of the Kingdom in the Gospel teaching of Jesus is the Kingdom of God to be manifested in the future when Jesus returns to administer it on earth in company with the saints of all the ages. These will function with him as under-sovereigns in a world reborn, restored and reconstituted. Present conditions tell of our world plight and the desperate need for a better human society. This will eventually materialize

as the Kingdom of God to be inaugurated on earth as all the prophets foresaw. The Gospel of the Kingdom invites all to become caught up in this thrilling, divine scheme, to share the passion of God Himself and His unique agent the Lord Jesus Messiah (Luke 4:43; cp. 2:49, "God's agenda").

The Bible from cover to cover looks forward to the time when God's people will be in God's place, with God's Prince established in the Kingdom which is his by divine Promise. Blessed indeed are the meek, because they will inherit the earth/the Kingdom/the Life of the Age to come (immortality gained in the resurrection) (see Matt. 5:5; 25:34; 19:29; I Cor 15:23).♦

#### A word of warning to the discerning:

"The Church has not usually in practice (whatever it may have claimed to be doing in theory) based its Christology [view of who Christ is] exclusively on the witness of the New Testament" (Professor Maurice Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, the Hulsean Lectures, 1973, SCM Press, p. 54).

The challenge to students of Jesus and the Bible is to find out what in fact Scripture does teach about the identity of Jesus. It should not be assumed that "received," ecclesiastical views are necessarily those of the original disciples.

"It is better to be divided by Truth than to be united in error. It is better to speak the truth that hurts and then heals, than falsehood that comforts and then kills. Let me tell you something, friend, it is not love and it is not friendship if we fail to declare the whole counsel of God. It is better to be hated for telling the truth than to be loved for telling a lie. It is impossible to find anyone in the Bible who was a power for God who did not have enemies and was not hated. It is better to stand alone with the truth than to be wrong with a multitude. It is better to succeed ultimately with the truth than to succeed temporarily with a lie. There is only one Gospel...." (Adrian Rodgers, from a talk delivered at the National Religious Broadcasters Convention, 1996).

### FRIEDRICH LOOFS

Professor of Systematic Theology and historian of doctrinal development, 1858-1928, brilliantly put his finger on the early Christian defection from the simple monotheism of the Bible. He pinpoints the "problem" of post-biblical mis-development in regard to who God and Jesus are.

"The Apologists ['church fathers' like Justin Martyr, mid-2nd century] laid the foundation for the perversion (Verkehrung) of Christianity into a revealed [philosophical] teaching. Specifically, their Christology affected the later development disastrously. By taking for granted the transfer of the concept of Son of God onto the preexisting Christ, they were the cause of the Christological problem of the 4th century. They caused a shift in the point of departure of Christological thinking — away from the historical Christ and onto the issue of preexistence. They thus shifted attention away from the historical life of Jesus, putting it into the shadow and promoting instead the Incarnation. They tied Christology to cosmology and could not tie it to soteriology. The Logos teaching is not a "higher" Christology than the customary one. It lags in fact far behind the genuine appreciation of Christ. According to their teaching it is no longer God who reveals Himself in Christ, but the Logos, the inferior God, a God who as God is subordinated to the Highest God (inferiorism or subordinationism).

"In addition the suppression of economic-trinitarian ideas by metaphysical-pluralistic concepts of the divine triad (*trias*) can be traced to the Apologists" (Friedrich Loofs, *Leitfaden zum Studium des Dogmengeschichte* [manual for the study of the history of dogma] (1890), part 1 ch. 2, section 18: "Christianity as a Revealed Philosophy. The Greek Apologists," Niemeyer Verlag, 1951, p. 97. Translation from the German is ours).

This disastrous development is reflected exactly in modern popular evangelism. D. James Kennedy says: "Many people today think the essence of Christianity is Jesus' teachings, but that is not so... 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" ("How I Know Jesus Is God," Truths that Transform, 11/17/1989).

## Responses

"I have not had the pleasure to hear the truth and accuracy of what you expressed in a long time. The simplicity of what the Bible truly says about the Kingdom of God and attached subjects has entirely been counterfeited, as has most of the rest of the Word of God. Part of the paganism masquerading as real Christianity! So much so that it's almost special and unique to hear again what really should be very common knowledge."

- British Columbia, Canada

"I have just received the December 1998 edition of your newsletter. It is fantastic!"

— Gatesville, TX

"Wednesday marked 3 years since I heard the Gospel about the Kingdom of God coming to the earth in the future! As usual this time of the year, I take a day to reflect on what the Gospel of the Kingdom means to me: Two words describe that: It's Everything!!" — *Pennsylvania* 

"I thank God for opening the Bible for us in regard to His kingdom. I started reading the materials you sent to me and enjoying all of it. Despite the fact that I'm in Nigeria I'm still part of your studies. I want you to help me very well."

— Nigeria

- Listeners to "Focus on the Kingdom" in Africa should please note the change of frequencies on Angel 5. Some of you have told us that you could no longer bring in the program on short-wave. This may be due to frequency alterations at WHRI.
- We welcome readers' constructive comments on any of the issues treated in this monthly publication. It may be that specific questions occur to you as you read. Please send them along. We will attempt to provide documented answers.