# **► Focus** on the Kingdom

Volume 2 No. 2 Anthony Buzzard, editor November, 1999

"Whoever acquires sense wins profit from it; whoever treasures understanding finds happiness" (Prov. 19:8).

# Which Jesus and Which Gospel Do You Believe in?

Scholars say:

"There can be no question that in our Lord's teaching the Kingdom of God is the representative and allembracing summary of his distinctive message."

"Preaching about the Kingdom of God sums up the ministry of Jesus, the apostles, the disciples and Paul."

"Extracting the Kingdom of God from the message of Jesus would be like blasting away the foundation of a skyscraper."

We are challenged, as we hope our readers will be, with the scholarly consensus (above) about the nature of the Christian faith as Jesus presented it. Quotations could be multiplied. But there is no need for this. Anyone in possession of a Bible and asking the question, "What was Jesus' agenda?" is bound to concur with the professionals: Jesus preached and taught the Gospel concerning the Kingdom of God. All of Jesus' teaching revolved around

the Kingdom Gospel. "Kingdom of God" is the shorthand summary of what Jesus was about, and therefore what his followers are supposed to be about — unless of course one decides that the teaching agenda of Jesus is now irrelevant. But could one be called a Christian while trying to restrict the relevance of Jesus to the first century AD? Would not this be a complete denial of the Great Commission, which commands a continuation of the teaching ministry of Jesus until he returns at "the end of the age" (which was not AD 70!).

Practically anything has been possible in terms of "Christian" theology. Mormons claim that Jesus is their teacher. The Mormon God has several wives and was man before he became God. Politicians of various stripes have claimed Jesus as their inspiration. Jesus has been made to authorize aggressive warfare and absolute pacifism. Denominations of all varieties suppose that Jesus is their founder. But the claim itself is not enough to make it so.

A contemporary scholar is honest enough to admit that appending "Christ" or "Jesus" to a system of thinking does not thereby mean that Jesus would recognize himself as the author of that system. The Oxford professor and writer, E.P. Sanders, is distinguished for his extensive knowledge of the Jewish world in which Jesus taught. Resisting the temptation, for which many fall, of trying to extract Jesus from his native Jewish environment, Sanders correctly describes Jesus as a Jewish restorationist prophet. Jesus, in

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other words, fits the mold of a Hebrew prophet who publicly and privately announced God's Plan for the reconstitution of human society. Jesus saw himself as the one to spearhead the divine Plan. Jesus envisaged in everything he taught a coming new world of harmony. Jesus prayed for the day to come when God's will would be carried out across the earth. Jesus longed, as had the prophets of Israel, for the nation to fulfill its destiny as a light to the world out the hope of personal and international rescue from confusion, deception and death itself. To participate in the attainment of this grand divine objective Jesus uttered his famous teaching slogan, "Seek first the Kingdom of God..."

But are churchgoers seeking the Kingdom of God as the first priority in their lives? Do they indeed even know what Jesus meant by the Kingdom? If you belong, say, to an average liberal Protestant church, are you likely to receive weekly instruction in what mattered to Jesus? Not according to Professor Sanders. Listen to his candid admission.

Concluding his most valuable book, Jesus and Judaism (Fortress Press, 1985), Sanders has this to say: "I have been engaged for some years in the effort to free history and exegesis [explaining the Bible] from the control of theology; that is from being obligated to come to certain conclusions which are pre-determined by theological commitment." His book is dedicated to the same task. What does he mean? He is aware, as are many professional students of the Bible, that "theology" — ways of understanding to which churchgoers are committed, often from their earliest years — must not be allowed to pre-determine how one understands the Bible and the actual Jesus of history. Sanders knows well that "dogma" - established ways of describing Christianity, particularly as defined in traditional creeds — has a frightening potential for completely blinding the churchgoer to the biblical Jesus and his teaching. Sanders had dedicated his efforts to freeing the study of history and "exegesis" (how one explains what the Bible means) from the tyranny of "theology" and "church."

Sanders goes on: "I aim to be only a historian and an exegete. But, since I have criticized so many for having their 'history' and 'exegesis' dictated by theology, the reader may well wonder [yes, indeed!] how well 'my' Jesus squares with my theological heritage." Simply put, how does the Jesus whom the Professor discovers from his study of history and the Bible read in its own Jewish context fit with the Jesus he hears about in church?

This is just the question we put to ourselves and readers, and we wonder if perhaps Sanders' reply may "ring a bell" with pew-sitters in many different settings. Sanders says this: "I am a liberal, modern secularized Protestant, brought up in a church dominated by a low Christology and the social Gospel. I am proud of the things that that religious tradition stands for. I am not bold enough, however, to suppose that Jesus came to establish it or that he died for the sake of its principles" (pp. 333, 334, italics mine).

This seems to us a profoundly revealing concession: that a group of people meeting year after year in a church setting, possessing a well-defined set of goals and ideals and calling themselves "Christian," may in fact be completely out of touch with Jesus as he actually was and is. The very idea that Christ may not be the founder of a Christian church is alarming.

How could such a challenging and problematic situation arise? Quite easily, if the recorded sayings of Jesus are our guide. Jesus provoked the anger of the established religion of his day with exactly the Professor's point. "You say you are following God's instructions, but your teachings are fashioned according to your own traditions and in accordance with agendas which please *you* and provide *you* with a satisfying feeling that you are 'doing good'" (see Matt. 22:29; 15:9; II Tim. 4:1-4).

"You are allowing, in other words, your theological heritage to control your understanding of the Bible. Your way of reading the Bible drowns out the intended meaning of Focus on the Kingdom

the Bible. While claiming Jesus as your teacher, you have actually rejected him."

Jesus' complaint runs as follows: "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God." "In vain you worship, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." Jesus' strictures are echoes of the prophets who preceded him: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6). "If they do not speak according to the word [in the New Testament the word is the Gospel], it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20). Paul experienced the religion of his day as equally wide of the mark: "They have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge" (Rom. 10:2) Religion, religion everywhere, but precious little of the teaching of Jesus.

If this analysis of our present situation makes any appeal, it can be dramatically confirmed by assigning oneself the substantial task of prolonged investigation. The Bereans have blazed the trail for those who determine to seek truth and find it. "Those in Berea were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica and they investigated the Scriptures on a daily basis to see if what Paul was telling them was true." Therefore many became true believers (Acts 17:11, 12). With increasing frequency we hear this from our radio and e-mail contacts: "I had been pleading with God for Truth amongst all the confusion...I really wanted to know, at any cost...And I discovered the Gospel of the Kingdom. Now the Bible has come alive for me in a new way."

Jesus' advice is priceless: "Seek first the Kingdom of God..." To do this, comb through Matthew, Mark and Luke in search of the historical Jesus and his teaching. Refer often to Daniel 2 and 7 and the prophets in general. These provide essential background Kingdom information. Most churchgoers are fed a diet largely from the epistles of Paul. Paul, however, assumes that his readers know the Gospel as Jesus taught it. After all, in the epistles, Paul was writing to established churches who had previously learned and accepted the Gospel.

For further study we recommend a book by another Oxford scholar and hope to comment on this in our next issue. The book is Jesus and the Victory of God, by N.T. Wright (Fortress Press, 1996). This author, like Sanders, studies and explains Jesus in his Jewish context. We do not agree with all that the learned author proposes, but much of what he writes will show you Jesus as he was and is: the Messiah of Israel and announcer of the Kingdom of the one God of Judaism's monotheism. How do we Gentiles get in on the program? By an earnest response to that Messiah's Kingdom Gospel (Mark 1:14, 15) and by becoming ourselves the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16; Phil 3:3). A saint in the Bible is one appointed to rule in the Kingdom to come — a destiny requiring our urgent attention. \mu

## The Earth — What Is it for?

by Jim Kunz

A short time ago an acquaintance, formerly in a scientific field, informed my wife and me that the earth was a result of the big bang, purely accidental.

It follows that the inhabitants who, according to him, evolved on this sphere, are a result of time and happenstance too. Existence is a gigantic, mindless accident!

This reminded me that the secular world does not try to explain what the earth is for. Their hypotheses about the earth's beginnings invariably leave things to random chance. This in turn makes the question, "what's it for?" moot, irrelevant. If it is by chance, there is no purpose for its existence. It would seem a rather clever way of obscuring the truth about the real reason it exists. "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood

through what has been made, so that they are without excuse" (Rom.1:20, NASV).

But if everything is random, there is no way to know what the earth is for. Or is there?

The awesome complexity of the earth and its systems, the even more awesome complexity of life, right down to its simplest forms, still imperfectly and only partially understood, is surely the most remarkable set of coincidental, by chance accidents ever known or recorded by mankind.

Can we conclude, then, that the earth and the life therein are purely accidental and without purpose? By no means! No one has given irrefutable proof that the earth and life happened by chance. Many scientists, seeing the minute complexities and intricacies of "simple" life forms, have concluded that the earth and all that's in it is by design and plan brought about by a cosmic mind. Chance happenings, in their minds, don't have a chance. The odds are totally against such a thing. It is in the realm of impossibility. Henry Morris in The Biblical Basis for Modern Science says, "....there are now thousands of qualified scientists around the world who quite definitely believe in the full verbal inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures" (p 20).

Why does the earth exist? Perhaps we had better look to a far better source than the secular for our answer. The cosmic mind we spoke of is the awesome, eternal, creating God who does provide answers.

Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." That's no accident! Psalm 102:25 says, "In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands." It was by plan and design. Therefore it must have a purpose, a reason for existence.

The major church denominations today believe Genesis 1:1 and Psalm 102:25. The one I attended when growing up, however, did not give a definitive reason for the earth's existence. The subject was never even mentioned. The Kingdom message was ignored. It was taught that the immortal soul, upon death, went to

heaven. The earth became somewhat unimportant. Our future was in heaven. Perhaps, again, a clever way of obscuring and avoiding the reason the earth exists. One secular, one religious.

Has God in His infinite wisdom given us knowledge about the creation of the earth, but withheld the reason for its existence? It hardly seems likely. Actually many scholars and students of the Bible have clearly seen its purpose. It is a major part of His revelation. And it is the centerpiece of Christ's teachings.

A hint is given in Isaiah 45:18: "For this is what the Lord says — He who created the heavens, He is God; He who fashioned and made the earth, He founded it; He did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited..." (NIV). It was created to be inhabited. But there is much more.

George N.H. Peters in his Theocratic Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Vol. 1, p. 34, quotes from King Henry VI's Catechism: "Before the Lord God made heaven and earth. He determined to have for Himself a Kingdom most beautiful and commonwealth." To this quote, he adds one by Moll: "At the very creation of the world God looked forward to and made arrangements for the eternally abiding and unchangeable Kingdom of glory; and to the introduction of that Kingdom tend all the revelations, arrangements, and providences of God in the history of the world."

This shows a remarkable depth of understanding of what the earth is for.

Christ's ministry centered around the Kingdom of God teaching (Matt. 4:17, 23; Mark 1:14-15). He sent his disciples out with the same Kingdom-Gospel (Matt.10:5, 7). In Matthew 25:34 he gives a clear, concise reason for the earth's existence: "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.""

This global sphere, then, is not an accident. It was designed and prepared for the Kingdom.

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Peters says, "From the foundation of the world' is indicative that God purposed this very earth, when founded, for this Kingdom" (*The Theocratic Kingdom*, Vol. 1, p. 35). The earth, as originally created, truly a crown jewel in the universe before it was cursed, was evidence of God's intention to carry out His plan for His Kingdom. As Christ's teachings show, this plan, though delayed through Adam's rebellion, is still being carried out. The earth still exists for the coming Kingdom.

Isaiah 45:18 tells us that the earth was formed to be inhabited. As evidence indicates that the Kingdom was part of God's plan before creation, so were the inhabitants of the Kingdom. In John 17:24 Christ speaks of the Father loving him before the foundation of the world. "For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you" (I Pet. 1:20, NASV). The citizens who are to inhabit the kingdom were also planned for before creation. Christ was the centerpiece of that planning.

"Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him in love, He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will" (Eph. 1:4, 5, NASV). God preplanned the kingdom, the Messiah, and the ones who share in populating the kingdom, its inhabitants. It is clear that the earth was designed and created as the location of the Kingdom of God. If you are interested in Christian destiny, get out an atlas and look forward to inheriting the renewed planet (Matt. 5:5).

We have seen what the earth is for. Let's ask another question. Will God utilize it as it is when Christ comes to set up His government on earth?

As human beings must change and be prepared to become citizens of the kingdom (Eph. 2:19), so the earth must be changed too. It is not the flawless sphere it was at creation, "For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it,

in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now" (Rom 8:20-22, NASV). It has been cursed. It must be restored to be a suitable dwelling place for the glorious Kingdom and its inhabitants, "For just as the new heavens and the new earth which I make will endure before Me, declares the Lord, so your offspring and your name will endure" (Isa. 66:22, NASV).

The present degenerate and decadent system will be forgotten and replaced with a new heavens and earth (Isa. 65:17-18). The apostle Peter says, "even now we are looking for a new heavens and earth in which righteousness dwells" (II Pet. 3:13).

Revelation 21:1 portrays the new heavens and earth. The former has passed away. The earth is restored to its original, beautiful, radiant, breathtaking glory, now suitable for its new inhabitants. God, Himself, in this opulent, royal setting, will dwell here in His full glory (v. 3). This is what the earth is for.  $\mbox{\ensuremath{\square}}$ 

# **An Invitation to Our Readers**

Atlanta Bible College and the *Journal from* the *Radical Reformation* will host its ninth annual Theological Conference at Atlanta Bible College, Morrow, GA, from 2:00 p.m. on Friday, Feb. 11<sup>th</sup>, 2000 until 12:00 noon, Sunday, 13<sup>th</sup> February.

We are planning a slightly different format for the opening afternoon of our conference. Our Saturday and Sunday sessions will follow the pattern of previous years. At the Friday afternoon session, we have invited two distinguished authors to discuss their opposing views of the origin of the universe. Professor Marian Hillar is well known to us as an enthusiast for the history of Socinianism, and he has attended our conference regularly. He is the author of an important work on the conflict between John Calvin and Michael Servetus on the issue of the Godhead and is currently writing another book on the development of early Christian thought. Dr. Hillar is a professor both of chemistry and philosophy at Texas Southern University. Dr. Charles Thaxton is a well-known lecturer and author in the field of "Intelligent Design," and author of several books including the Soul of Science. Dr. Thaxton lectures extensively in the USA and in Europe in defense of creationism. Marian and Charles have opposing views of the origin of the universe and will discuss their differences in a forum entitled "Chance, Necessity or Design: A Dialogue Between an Atheist and a Theist."

An invitation has been given to Professor Richard Hiers of the University of Florida at Gainesville to address us in a field of special interest to him: The Kingdom of God and how this central biblical topic has been obscured in much traditional theology. Professor Hiers is the author of several books on the teaching of Jesus and an expert on Jesus' eschatological outlook. His findings correspond with many of the insights of our denomination. Professor Hiers' sessions will be specially valuable to any searching the Jewish roots of Jesus and the Christian faith.

Juan Baixeras will present his thoughts on issues concerning the activity of the Spirit, and Kent Ross, Professor of Church History at Atlanta Bible College, will speak on "The Emergence of the Minority Church as a Distinct Entity in the Reformation."

Attendance at this weekend gathering of truth-seekers from different parts of the USA as well as from abroad has proven to be a blessing for many over the past eight years. The conference presents a unique forum for any who are seeking to understand the faith in its original Jewish setting. There will be ample opportunity for questions and discussion of biblical issues of all sorts. We encourage all of you to return or

make this your first occasion to be with us at ABC. We would so much enjoy meeting any of our new radio/website contacts, whose numbers have increased very significantly during the past year. The conference will be attended also by some of the pastors of the Church of God (Abrahamic Faith) as well as by students at Atlanta Bible College.

An important feature of our conferences has been shorter presentations from our visitors. We invite all who come, if they wish, to tell us of their own journey of faith. If any of you would like a time-slot (about 20 minutes) to tell us about yourself and your search for truth, we would love to hear from you at a session expressly devoted to "personal faith stories."

On the practical level, we will have a block reservation of rooms at the Red Roof Inn, 1348 South Lake Plaza Drive, I-75 and SR 54, exit 76, Morrow, GA. 30260 (770-968-1483). Note that until 28<sup>th</sup> January, 2000, these rooms will be available at per night prices of:

1) Single, \$35. 2) One king-size bed, \$42.99. 3) Two king-sized beds, \$46.99. These rooms may be booked by calling (800) 843-7663 and mentioning that you are with ABC Theological Conference. You should quote the blockbooking number: B 114000352.

If you have questions concerning any of the above, please contact us here at Atlanta Bible College at (800) 347-4261. We look forward to hearing from you and meeting you in February.

We are hoping for a wonderful gathering of truth-seeking Christians. It is an inspiring time and a great opportunity for fellowship and education. Do make plans to take the weekend of February 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> off and fly or drive to Atlanta. We will provide transportation from the airport to ABC. We think you will be enriched by your experience in fellowship with believers of similar persuasion.

See costs and registration form on next page.

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### **Notable Blunders**

"The Scriptures say, 'The Lord our God is one Lord' (Deut. 6:4). The 'one' used in this statement is not the numerical digit 'one' in the number series 'one, two, three, four, five, six, seven'" (M.G. Gutzke, D.D., Ph.D, *Plain Talk about Christian Words*).

The word one (echad) is indeed the numerical digit "one." See, for example, Ecclesiastes 4:9: "Two are better than one" and hundreds of similar examples.

#### 2000 Theological Conference Cost

	Regular	Full-time
	Rate	Student
Early Bird(by Jan 20 <sup>th</sup> )	\$29	\$19
After Jan. 20th	\$39	\$29

Please send:

#### **Comments**

"I recently ran across your program on a local station which broadcasts into our area when the signal is "right," and I must say it has been a real blessing to me. I am 53 years old and have been in the ministry since my early twenties. However, of late I have become very disenchanted with the traditional Christian ministry. Your program has been a breath of fresh air blowing through my soul. Thank you. I have downloaded and read several of your articles which I find that I can agree with, albeit, with some squirming on my part, but the Scriptures are there so what can I say? I have returned to your web site, which I have book marked, to get a few more articles to read. I am saving some of them for later, "when I can bear them." Thank you again for your candid honesty and your patience in sharing this solid information."

— Washington

"I would like to express my appreciation for your Internet site. It has greatly helped me understand the Kingdom of God."

— California

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