

Focus on the Kingdom

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Anthony Buzzard, editor

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Getting the Right Message in Order to Be Saved

“The means of the renewal of life consists of **the Word of God** (1 Pet 1:23); this serves also the growth and strengthening of the newly born babes (2 Pet. 2:2)...This divine generation of the new man produces the state of the children of God, which is here restoration of a relation with the being of God...Its realization is the work of the Spirit (John 3:6, 8). To the Word is ascribed mediation in so far as it is **the medium of the Spirit** (John 6:63)” (“Regeneration,” *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*).

With precision and clarity this distinguished encyclopedia describes what it means to be a Christian. Let me paraphrase: Renewed life, rebirth happens when a person becomes a new-born baby in Christ. This restores our relationship with God. The cause of this wonderful event is “the word.” “The word” transmits the spirit which produces the new birth.

We can make it even simpler: You must be born again (John 3:3, 5). This will restore your relationship with God. The tool which brings about this rebirth is “the word.” The word carries the spirit of God in itself. See John 6:63: “The words I speak to you are spirit and life” and Proverbs 1:23: “I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you” (also Job 26:4; Isa. 53:11).

Becoming a Christian sounds rather straightforward. But wait! “The tool which brings about the rebirth is ‘the word.’” So what is “the word”? It is obvious that the crucial question has to do with “the word.” Without “the word” (any old “word” will not do!), there can be no mending of the broken relationship between God and man and no rebirth.

Are we prepared to be Bereans “who investigated the Scriptures daily to find out if what they were hearing was true?” (Acts 17:11).

So, I repeat, what is this vital “word?” The answer is provided on page after page of the New Testament, but it gets very little exposure in modern preaching.

Take the book of Acts. Look up the word “word” and you will see immediately that the “word” is just another word for “the message” — the Gospel message of salvation. The obvious question is this: What message was that?

Peter answers: “**The word** which [God] sent to the people of Israel, announcing peace through Jesus Christ (he is lord of all). You yourselves know what took place throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached” (Acts 10:36-37).

There it is. The all-important “word” was none other than the Gospel Message about the Kingdom, which God preached through the ministry of *the historical Jesus of Nazareth while he lived in Israel*.

Let us hear Jesus’ definition of the Gospel. Jesus answers: “I must **preach the Gospel about the Kingdom of God**. That is why God sent me” (Luke 4:43).

Throughout Matthew, Mark and Luke you will find Jesus constantly on the go, and relentlessly and faithfully preaching to the public **the Gospel about the Kingdom of God**. (Look up Mark 1:14-15; Matt. 4:17, 23; 9:35; Luke 8:1; 9:2, 6, 11; 10:9; 20:1.)

In Luke 4:43 and 5:1 we find an equation, two phrases meaning the same thing. Jesus, we learn, was commissioned by God to preach the Gospel about the Kingdom of God, and in Luke 5:1 this Gospel **about the Kingdom** is called simply “the word of God.”

Jesus was the original preacher of the saving Gospel of the Kingdom (see Heb 2:3: Salvation *had its beginning* when it was spoken by Jesus). The shorthand form of that message is simply “the word.”

Back to Acts. This book tells us what the Apostles always preached. It was “the word.” Becoming a Christian depended, as its first condition, on hearing, understanding, believing and accepting “the word.” The word is the Gospel message of the Kingdom. It is the word to be obeyed because it was commanded by Jesus speaking for God.

Acts 2:41: “Those who had accepted **the word** were baptized.”

Acts 4:29: “Grant that Your servants may speak Your **word** with confidence.”

Acts 4:31: They “began to speak **the word of God** with boldness.”

Acts 6:2, 4: “It is not desirable for us to neglect **the word of God** to serve tables...But we will devote ourselves to prayer and serving **the word**.”

Acts 6:7: “**The word of God** kept spreading and the number of disciples continued to increase greatly.”

Acts 8:14: “Samaria had accepted **the word of God**.”

Acts 11:19: They were “speaking **the word**.”

Acts 12:24: “**The word of the Lord** continued to grow and multiply.”

Acts 13:5: “They began to proclaim **the word of God** in the synagogues.”

Acts 13:7: Sergius Paulus “wanted to hear **the word of God.**”

Acts 13:26: Paul said, “To us **the word** of this salvation has been sent.”

Acts 13:44: “The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear **the word of the Lord.**”

Acts 13:49: “**The word of the Lord** was being spread through the whole region.”

Please observe that “the word” is not just another name for the Bible, as popularly and misleadingly used today. “The word” means the Gospel of the Kingdom and the things concerning Jesus (Acts 8:12).

In Acts 14:3 the wonderful word is called “the word of God’s grace,” and in 15:7 “the word of the Gospel” which Gentiles must hear and believe. In Acts 16:32 the Philippian jailer heard the word: “They spoke the word of the Lord to him.”

Everywhere in the Book of Acts becoming a Christian means hearing the word and understanding it. Did you notice that not once did Luke report that “they accepted Jesus” or “asked Jesus into their heart”?

That sort of language is too vague. It is much too subjective, and open to every sort of misunderstanding. It is not biblical language. Luke was precise. For him accepting Jesus meant “accepting **the word.**”

And that saving word was “the word which God sent to Israel preaching peace **through** Jesus Christ,” an event which happened “throughout Judea...following the ministry of John” (Acts 10:36-37).

And what was that word all about? Luke leaves us in no doubt. If we missed the fact that it was “the Gospel of the Kingdom” preached by Jesus throughout Galilee, we have many more chances of grasping the content of the message.

What did it mean to hear and accept “the word”? (Acts 8:4, 14). Luke provides an exact definition. Acts 8:12: “When they believed Philip **preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom** and the name of Jesus, they were being baptized, both men and women.”

All roads of investigation lead back to the same central and basic Christian fact: The Gospel or word which initiates the wonderful process of salvation is none other than the Gospel which God **preached through Jesus** (Acts 10:36-37): The Gospel about the Kingdom. That Gospel is the saving tool which creates the new life and the new birth. Without that Gospel of the Kingdom message as foundation there can be no salvation and no gaining of immortality (2 Tim. 1:10).

Will you accept Jesus by accepting and believing his precious “word of the Kingdom” (Matt. 13:19; Mark 1:14- 15)? The Gospel *begins* in Mark 1:1, 14, where Jesus commands us to “repent and believe God’s Gospel about the Kingdom.”

The Gospel does not begin with Paul. It begins with John the Baptist and Jesus (Luke 16:16).

Please now notice that Satan is busy trying to snatch away “the word of the Kingdom so that [you] may not believe it **and be saved**” (Luke 8:12; Matt. 13:19). Satan is fully aware of the true saving Gospel and musters all his forces to obstruct it and keep it from the public eye. Satan wants no human being to be saved! Satan’s great objective is to keep the Gospel of the Kingdom away from the public. If we listen to today’s offers of “salvation,” it seems that the Devil has been largely successful.

The huge importance of what we are suggesting is that the internet is filled with “gospels” which are not defined as Jesus defined the Gospel. The Apostles were fully aware of the threat to salvation presented by false gospels. Paul pronounced a double curse on anyone who would distort the one and only true Gospel message (Gal. 1:8-9). 1 Timothy 6:3 provides the stark warning which we dare not neglect. Paul said, “If anyone teaches something different and does not keep to the sound teaching, that of our Lord Jesus Christ, the doctrine which is in accordance with true religion, he is arrogant and understands nothing.”

John’s warning is precisely the same: “If anyone does not remain in the teaching of Messiah, but goes beyond it, he does not have God with him. Only those who remain in what Christ taught can have the Father and the Son with them” (2 John 9). Jesus had said the same thing: “He who believes in the Son has life, but he who disobeys the Son does not have life but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36). No one should risk disobeying the *first* command of Jesus in Mark 1:14-15.

Jesus raised his voice rarely, but when he did he intended to give maximum emphasis to his words: In John 12:44-48, “Jesus cried out and said, ‘He who believes in me does not believe in me but in the one who sent me. He who understands me understands the one who sent me. I came as a light into the world, so that whoever believes in me would not remain in darkness. And if anyone hears my words [summarized as the Gospel of the Kingdom] and does not believe them, I do not judge him, for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. He who rejects me and does not accept my words, has one that judges him. The word that I have spoken will indeed judge him at the last day.’”

It is no surprise then that Luke also recorded Jesus as raising his voice for maximum emphasis: “He customarily used to raise his voice: ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear...The seed is the word of God [the word about the Kingdom, Matt. 13:19]. Those by the road are those who have heard it. Then the Devil comes and takes away the word [about the Kingdom] from their heart, so that they cannot believe it [the Gospel about the Kingdom] and be saved’” (Luke 8:8-12).

The internet is filled with invitations to salvation without any reference to the Gospel of the Kingdom, as Jesus and Paul taught it (Luke 4:43; Acts 20:24-25; 19:8; 28:23, 31).

In fact, a typical evangelical discussion of the Gospel tells us expressly that the Gospel for us today is *not* about the Kingdom of God, but the Gospel of the grace of God. Such a false distinction, creating more than one Gospel, contradicting Acts 20:24-25 and contradicting Jesus and Paul, cries out for correction. By asking good questions and by demanding the biblical definition of the saving Gospel, we can all help to correct the chaos which is so prevalent.

The words of F.F. Bruce offer a valuable warning designed to correct today's massive confusion over the message of salvation. On the Gospel, F.F. Bruce makes a simple and correct statement:

"The kingdom of which [Jesus] spoke during his ministry was the kingdom foretold in the book of Daniel, which the God of heaven was to set up in the latter days and which, superseding all previous world empires, was to endure forever (Dan. 2:44; 7:14)."¹

On Acts 8:12, Bruce says, "This was not a different gospel from that which our Lord and his apostles had preached before his death: its keynotes (according to Luke) were still repentance, faith, and the forgiveness of sins, accompanied by baptism, the gift of the Spirit, and evidential works. There was naturally a change of emphasis because of the new perspective occasioned by the saving events of Jesus' passion and exaltation and the coming of the Spirit...But it was the *same gospel* as he foretold would be proclaimed to all the nations, the gospel which before his ascension he charged his disciples to make known, still, as ever, 'the gospel of the kingdom,' but now, because of his redemptive work, proclaimed in his name...In this context [Acts 20:24-25] the proclaiming of the kingdom is evidently synonymous with bearing witness to the good news of God's grace (cf. 28:23)."² This fundamental fact is not grasped by many churchgoers. ✧

It's Not Fair!

by Barbara Buzzard

I have always been unnerved by thinking that I might well have been one of those in the Matthew 20:1-16 "it's not fair" camp. After all, it certainly *seems* unfair, definitely un-American! That "unfair" charge was made against the owner of the vineyard when he chose to pay those who came to work at the 11th hour the same wages as those who had worked all day. Surely, that's not fair – or is it?

We examined this passage in church to our great advantage. It is similar to the story of the prodigal son. And in that case it is the loyal, hardworking son who makes the "it's not fair" accusation against his father. But as the father points out, this son lost nothing and suffered

no hardship because of the forgiveness and graciousness of his father to the prodigal son. Would he not have wanted his brother to come to repentance and forgiveness and the restoration of his life? Was he envious because his father was generous? That is the way that the vineyard owner summed it up: "Are you envious because I am generous?" (Matt. 20:15b).

The Reality of Grace

The light bulb went on for me when I began to consider what it would have been like to be in the other camp's shoes. And what a very different set of emotions would play out. Just imagine the incredible joy and delight of that group who came in at the 11th hour. From their perspective the vineyard owner was spectacularly generous and kind. (Had it been their fault in the first place that they couldn't find work that day?)

Later in that chapter, Matthew 20:34 tells us that Jesus was moved with compassion. But I think that this instance was not the first time Jesus was moved with compassion. He was also acting out of a compassionate heart when he gave the same wages/reward to the late comers. And to cry "it's not fair" is to deny compassion and to deny grace. This "unfair" charge is only possible on a superficial level without understanding the plan of God.

And of course we can take this further: was it "fair" that Jesus who was sinless had to pay the penalty for our sins? It certainly makes one question: do we really *want* fair? Of course not! If we had "fair" then Jesus would not have died for us. We were given something inestimably greater. We were given grace and forgiveness through the lifeblood of a perfect man. The giving of one's blood is the greatest gift possible. There is no greater tribute of love than the one Jesus gave to us.

The Goodness (Grace) of God

I do understand that this is a parable, but we can mine it to find valuable lessons. Since we know that God wants everyone to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), why should we object when others are given opportunities and blessings? By being in the "it's not fair" camp wasn't I denying these latecomers a blessing? It's scary because one comes so close to criticizing Jesus (the vineyard owner) without even realizing it. What is jolting in this parable is the sense that somehow the all-day workers are being dealt with unjustly. But Jesus is no unjust judge! He acts like his Father who will *always* do right.³ The vineyard owner gave the workers exactly what they had contracted for.

Those invited to work at "the eleventh hour" are first asked why they have stood "idle" the whole day. Their answer is that no one had hired them. "There is an important reason for this conversation...The purpose of this insertion...is apparently to underline the fact that

¹ "Eschatology in Acts" in *Eschatology and the New Testament*, 1988, p. 52.

² *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 220, 433.

³ "Will not the judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen. 18:25b).

these are the ones rejected by other employers as unworthy...They are analogous to the tax collectors and the harlots invited into the kingdom by Jesus.”⁴ We are all aware of “the first will be last” principle in Scripture. And here we have it modeled for us. And so it is that the undesirables enter the Kingdom. Our God is a God of surprises who delights in grace. “The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

Grace and Truth Reign Supreme

“The teaching of the parable focuses on the grace shown to those enlisted in the eleventh hour, those regarded by others as not worth hiring. Only in the realm of grace is the equal treatment of all the workers possible. And it is precisely the latest comer, the least worthy, who is the most conspicuous example of the grace of the kingdom of God.

“The benefits of the kingdom of God, Jesus is here saying, are the same for all who become subject to the rule of its king, whenever they may come under His dominion. Jews have no precedence in this matter over Gentiles; and the man converted early in life is not for that reason entitled to better treatment from God than the man who is much older when he experiences the new birth, for all alike receive the best of treatment.”⁵

“Matthew’s church possibly identified those who worked the whole day with Israel and those who came last with the Gentiles, thus understanding the parable to signify the equality of Gentile Christians with Jewish Christians.”⁶

This too is an interesting insight: the fact that the vineyard owner kept hiring throughout the day suggests that the need was great. Hiring the last two groups of workers at 3:00 and at 5:00 reflects an urgency for workers. “Was it perhaps harvest time, and if so, does that urgency point to the urgency of the work of the kingdom? (cf. 9:37; 13:39),”⁷

What a wonderful lesson this was, that something so seemingly illogical could be shown to be the most satisfying and beautiful administration of grace. Our study allowed us to come close to the mind of *the man* dealing out justice. And it demonstrates perfectly that the Scriptures hold profound truths for us no matter how many times we have read them. Which is to say that there is always more to be gleaned. The only sound logic is to stay the course with God.

Cursing the Curse?!

There are several more instances in Scripture when the “unfair” charge might be leveled. Who hasn’t wondered about the fig tree cursed by Jesus? Note that the

fig tree which was cursed by Jesus for not producing fruit was not supposed to be in season at that time. It *seems* awfully unfair; it *seems* arbitrary. Gregory Boyd offers us the following insight: once we see this in the light of the background of the day, we add an amazing depth to our understanding. “In the apocalyptic worldview, all aspects of nature were believed to be under the guardianship of various angels. Some of these angels had rebelled and were now misusing their God-given authority. Everything from plagues to earthquakes to famines and violent storms were believed by many to be the consequence of fallen powers corrupting nature. Not only this, but barren or infected fig trees in apocalyptic thought were symbols of Satan’s curse, and the fruitfulness of fig trees had become a symbol of how creation will be restored when the Messiah comes and frees creation from the curse.

“In this light, we should interpret Jesus’ cursing of the fig tree as an act of ‘cursing the curse.’ Jesus is demonstrating that, where and when God reigns, the demonic corruption of nature will be overcome and nature will begin to be restored to the state God originally intended it to be in, when there shall be no more famines or life-threatening storms, and when there shall be no more violence in the animal kingdom or between humans and animals.”⁸

The Prize — An Abundant Understanding

The text in Mathew 25:28: “Take the talent away from him [who made no increase] and give it to the one with ten talents” may seem superficially unfair. If we equate it with the popular “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer” we miss out. “The distinction for Mark lies in how one responds to the ‘word.’ Attentive listening points to the productive ‘haves’ who are blessed with more. Failure to respond exposes the ‘have nots’ to the destructive forces which take away what they have.”⁹ Those who have paid attention to what they have heard, grasped it fully and responded accordingly will be blessed with yet more understanding.

“The prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled in them: ‘Even though you hear, you will not understand, and even though you see, you will not comprehend. [The implication here is that they could.] They have a stubborn attitude. They do not want to listen, and they have closed their eyes. If they did not close their eyes, they would be able to see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand in their minds. [i.e. it is not God’s doing that they cannot understand.] Then they could return to me, repent, and I would heal them” (Matt. 13:14-15).

⁴ *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 33b, p. 571

⁵ *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Matthew, p. 190

⁶ *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 33b, p. 573

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 571

⁸ Gregory Boyd, “How Jesus Cursed the Curse,” reknew.org, Oct. 2017

⁹ *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 34.

Salvation by Grace Alone?

Having seen the beauty and importance of grace, might we be tempted to dabble in the “Salvation by grace alone” camp? By no means, since it was the Gnostics who first proposed this idea.¹⁰ Gnostics say that works play no part in salvation. They also denied that Jesus came in the flesh; for this, John called them deceivers and antichrists (2 John 7).

“Our problem is that Augustine, Luther, and other Western theologians have convinced us that there’s an irreconcilable conflict between salvation based on grace and salvation conditioned on works or obedience. They have used a fallacious form of argumentation known as the ‘false dilemma,’ by asserting that there are only two possibilities regarding salvation: it’s either (1) a gift from God or (2) it’s something we earn by works.”¹¹

This supposed “problem” is readily solved by acknowledging that yes, salvation/grace is a gift, but it’s given by God to those who love and obey Him. Faith and works are not mutually exclusive. An understanding of the obedience of faith¹² is essential here.

The early Christians understood the connection between faith and obedience, a connection which cannot be broken:

“Rightly, then, to those who have believed and obey, grace will abound beyond measure.”¹³

“With respect to obedience and doctrine, we are not all sons of God. Rather, it is only those who truly believe in Him and do His will. Now those who do not believe, and do not obey His will, are sons and angels of the devil... Those who do not obey Him, being disinherited by Him, have ceased to be His sons.”¹⁴

This is a particularly interesting quotation as it highlights that not-to-be-broken connection between belief and obedience. What a travesty to think that “your faith has saved you” dispenses with obedience.

While on the subject of grace, and particularly with our post-modernist and corrupt culture where sin is flaunted continually — we should be struck by these words: “Grace with the Lord, when once learned and undertaken by us, should never afterward be cancelled by repetition of sin.”¹⁵ This is an astonishing charge — that sin (repetitive) can cancel grace.

Similarly, “No one, then, can be a believer and at the same time be licentious.”¹⁶ While these things sound all too obvious, they have been and are continually challenged by the “once saved, always saved” theology which does in fact enable licentiousness. And it appears that it is vastly more detrimental than we sometimes

¹⁰ Gnostics claimed that God revealed special (secret) knowledge to them.

¹¹ David, Bercot, *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up?* p. 61-62

¹² In our church we create hubs or groupings of Scriptures which fit together, e.g. the obedience of faith (John 3:36; Acts 6:7; **Rom. 1:5; 16:26**; Heb. 11:8).

perceive. The question is: Can a saved person be lost? Scripture clearly says yes.¹⁷

The early Christians labeled as heretics a group called Gnostics who preached that salvation was by grace alone. They taught that the Son of God took on the *appearance* of man but was not genuinely man and never died nor was resurrected.¹⁸ It was about this group that John wrote: “Many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist” (2 John 7).

Now This *Really* Isn’t Fair!

Anthony and I recently had a fascinating conversation with a Christian gentleman on the demerits of Calvinism. He said, “I despise Calvinism.” His wife had been teaching a Sunday School class on the subject of Calvinism and in her research found that one well-known theologian said it was like this: you take a seat in the classroom and the teacher instructs you to reach under your chair to see if there is a number there. If there is, you’re in the Christian camp. If not, you are doomed. And there is not a single thing you can do about it — no prayer, no repentance, no compassion, no grace, i.e. no hope.

The man with whom we were talking said that he was so appalled by this that he would say to God, if he were “lucky” enough to get a number under his seat, “Just give that number to someone else.” (But, he thought, that sort of God would probably just rip it up.) His reasoning was this: “I could never love a God like that who was so arbitrary and cruel, and I certainly couldn’t worship Him. So I will just go to that other place.”

I, like others, cannot really write about Calvinism without raising my blood pressure — so hideous do I find it. So I shall leave it to other calmer writers to reveal its evils. But I relate to it in this way: I often wondered if I would *like* the God I was introduced to as a child in the Methodist Church. I can’t remember specifically why I had the suspicion that I wouldn’t like Him, but certainly there was something there causing me to distrust the Almighty. Perhaps if He had been presented as the loving, compassionate God that He is, rather than One who was “out to get you,” I would have been less uneasy. I have repented of this scurrilous attitude and am more than delighted that the God of Scripture is so far above anything I could have imagined. I certainly have no worries about His character!

¹³ Clement of Alexandria (c. 195), 2, 196, emphasis mine.

¹⁴ Irenaeus (c. 180), 1.525

¹⁵ Tertullian (c. 203), 3,660.

¹⁶ Clement of Alexandria

¹⁷ 1 Tim. 4:16; Mat. 7:21; 24:13; Jn. 5:28-29; Rev. 22:12

¹⁸ *Will the Real Heretics Please stand Up?* p. 67.

God Is Not Fair?

This is a most interesting reflection and one to consider: “That’s the problem with God. He is not fair. He is generous! In rewarding, He gives ‘good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over.’ In punishing, He gives only what we deserve.”¹⁹ In looking at the singular case of Jonah who did not want to do what God ordered him to, and did not want the people to whom he preached to turn to God — was God really “fair” to him? Jonah did not want mercy for these people; he flagrantly disobeyed God and ran the other way. God was so much more fair to him than he deserved.

What Fair Looks Like: The “Wider Hope”

This is a term denoting the broader hope for those not in the first resurrection. Continuing the fairness question, is it fair or even *conceivable* that God would eliminate from His Kingdom those who *never heard* of Jesus? We think not, given His qualities of mercy, compassion, and love. Add to that the fact that His ways and thoughts are so much superior to ours. Isaiah 55:1 encourages *everyone* who desires to come to Him. Verse seven promises compassion to the wicked one who repents. We also find this scenario in Isaiah 1: “Then I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning...Zion will be redeemed with justice, and her repentant ones with righteousness” (Isa. 1:26-27).

What is at stake is the righteousness or rightness of God’s judgment. This view is *not* universalism as the above texts requiring obedience apply to *all*. The Covenant promises are extended to all who obey and accept His invitation to abundant life in the Kingdom.

Isaiah 19:23-25 depicts that wider hope by describing that day when we see *Egypt, Assyria, and Israel* blessed, after all the horrors they had been through. Please examine this. It seems to be the same depiction as in Zechariah 14:16: “Then it will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went up against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths.” One of the constant themes of Scripture is that there is *always* a remnant. It is God’s pleasure to make a way for survivors. Isaiah 4:2-6 speaks about those very survivors.

Isaiah 65:1 speaks eloquently of God’s perspective: “I permitted Myself to be sought by those who did not ask for Me; I permitted Myself to be found by those who did not seek Me. I said, ‘Here am I, here am I’ to a nation which did not call on My name.”

If we err — let us err on the side of generosity. As in the biblical principle of the rich being generous (1 Tim. 6:18), let us also be generous, following our Father’s wonderful example. Perhaps this is a picture of the inescapable love of God. ✧

That Rock Was Christ

by John Cunningham, Northern Ireland

Believers in the personal pre-existence of the Lord Jesus Christ often appeal to the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:4, where he says of the Israelites in the wilderness that they “all drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank of that spiritual rock that followed them; and that rock was Christ.”

It is argued from this that Christ himself personally accompanied the people of Israel as they journeyed through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The verse is often tied in with several Old Testament texts which describe Yahweh as a Rock (Deut. 32:4; Ps. 18:2, 31). Since Yahweh is the rock, and Christ is also the rock who accompanied Israel, Christ must therefore *be* Yahweh, it is believed.

Defective Interpretation

This interpretation, common though it is, suffers from a number of serious defects. The first of these concerns the meaning of the term “Christ.” Too often we use it simply as a proper name for Jesus as if it were his surname (last name). “Christos” is the Greek form of the Hebrew word “Messiah,” meaning “the anointed one.” It was a title given to the kings of Israel. David was a “messiah” and was a type and forerunner of the one who would deliver the people of Israel and establish the Kingdom of God.

The coming of the Messiah is a common theme of Old Testament prophecy. He was to be the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15), the seed of Abraham (Gen. 22:18; Gal. 3:16, 19), the seed of Judah (Gen. 49:10; 1 Chron. 5:2), and the seed of David (2 Sam. 7:12-14; Isa. 11:1, 10; Rom. 1:3; 2 Tim. 2:8).

“Seed” in all these scriptures means “descendant.” This points to the fact that the Messiah was prophesied to arise from the human race. Nothing in the Old Testament suggests that the promised seed was already in existence in another form. For Paul to have taught that the Messiah was actually and personally present in the wilderness would have been a staggering contradiction of the words of the prophets.

Another Objection

The second major objection to this theory is the fact that God used angels to minister to Israel. The New Testament declares in three places that the Law was given by angels (Acts 7:38, 53; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2). In each of these passages an angelic giving of the Law forms an important part of the argument. Study each in its context with care and you will see that the common theme is the superiority of the Gospel to the Law. The Law was given only by angels, but the Gospel was brought by the Son of

¹⁹ Richard Briley, *Everything I Needed to Know About Success, I Learned in the Bible*, p. 43.

God and is therefore vastly superior to it. Christ could not have had any part, therefore, either in giving the Law to Israel, or in ministering to the Israelites in the wilderness.

Since the Messiah could not have been present personally in the wilderness, Paul's statement must mean that the rock *represented* or typified Christ in some way. It is not uncommon for Scripture to use the verb "to be" in a representational sense. Jesus said, "I am the door" (John 10:7); "I am the true vine" (John 15:1). In the institution of the Lord's Supper he said that the bread "is my body" and that the cup "is my blood" (1 Cor. 11:24-25), clearly meaning that they symbolized his broken body and shed blood.

Typological Parallels

This interpretation is strengthened by a close study of the whole passage from verse 1 to verse 11 of 1 Corinthians 10. Twice Paul states that the experiences of Israel were examples for us (v. 6, 11). The Greek word used here actually means "types."

The passing of the Israelites through the cloud and through the Red Sea was a "type" of Christian baptism. They were baptized "into Moses" (v. 2, NASB) as we are baptized "into Christ" (Rom. 6:3; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27). Verses 3 and 4 continue the typological parallel by referring to the incidents of the giving of the manna in Exodus 16, and the incidents at Rephidim and Kadesh when God miraculously supplied water out of a rock (Ex. 17:1-7; Num. 20:1-13).

The "spiritual food" mentioned in verse 3 is clearly the manna miraculously given daily to Israel over a period of 40 years. The giving of the manna is recorded in Exodus 16 and forms the background to John 6.

Two Rock Incidents

There are two incidents involving a rock recorded during the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites, and it is important to notice the difference between them.

The first incident occurred just after the miraculous giving of the manna. Israel arrived at Rephidim (Ex. 17:1) and immediately began to complain about lack of water, whereupon God commanded Moses to strike the rock. Water gushed out and the people's thirst was satisfied. The striking of the rock typifies the fact that Christ our Rock was smitten for us. The miraculous giving of the water typifies the giving of the Holy Spirit, the water of life (John 7:37-39).

The second incident occurred toward the end of the wandering in the wilderness. Again, Israel complained for lack of water and again God provided for their needs. This time, however, He clearly instructed Moses to *speak* to the rock, but in his anger Moses disobeyed and struck the rock twice (Num. 20:1-12).

In smiting the rock instead of speaking to it, Moses was guilty of destroying the type. The rock in Exodus 17 typified Christ in the flesh, smitten to give to us the water

of life, while the rock in Numbers 20 typified Christ our High Priest, not to be smitten twice (cp. Heb. 6:6), but only to be spoken to in order to supply the water of life.

The first incident occurred at the beginning of the wanderings, the second at the end; both incidents thus form a parable of Christ's continuous presence with his people during our "wilderness wanderings."

The two incidents we have looked at took place in entirely different locations, and there is a different Hebrew word for "rock" used in each place. In Exodus 17 the word is *tsur* and in Numbers 20 it is *sela*. So what does Paul mean when he states that "they drank of that spiritual rock which **followed them**"? Obviously a literal rock did not accompany Israel through the wilderness, and many feel that this is proof that Christ himself went with them. The answer is that Paul is using the language of Christian experience and reading it back into the Old Testament type. This is shown clearly by his reference to baptism in verses 1 and 2. The Israelites were not literally "baptized." In fact, we are told that the water did not come near them; they walked dry shod through the Red Sea. But their experience is a close enough parallel for Paul to say they were "baptized into Moses." Likewise the rock did not literally follow them. It was simply a type of Christ accompanying us through life. ✧

Scattered Brethren

Robin Todd's Scattered Brethren Network continues its mission to connect scattered biblical unitarians around the world for local fellowship opportunities. Currently there are over 930 of you on that network list. Unfortunately, some of you who signed up have since changed your email address, without notifying Robin of the change. Please email him at robinsings4u@comcast.net to update your email address. Also, there is now a Scattered Brethren Network Facebook page for you to "Like."

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"I was debating on the matter of the doctrine of the Trinity online. I had a tepid belief in the Trinity, not that I could clearly explain its propositions from the Bible, but because it is the widely held belief. I decided to dig deeper and stumbled upon Sir Anthony's debate with Dr Michael Brown and Dr James White. The propositions laid by Sir Anthony were, for me, more compelling, so I dove deeper still from your Youtube videos and focusonthekingdom.org. Then I was enamored with the clarity of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. It was like 'scales fell off my eyes.' My passion for the Gospel is rejuvenated." — *Equatorial Guinea*