

Focus on the Kingdom

Vol. 22 No. 11

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August, 2020

The Immortal Soul: A Devastating Doctrine

by Lonnie Craig, Arkansas

My pastor, Brother Tom New, spoke about the importance of preaching and teaching the Kingdom of God during our service one Sunday morning. One of the things he mentioned was that unlike the Gospel of the Kingdom, sadly many mainstream Christian churches teach the belief that all men and women have an immortal soul that either flies straight up to heaven or drops straight into hell at the moment of death, and it is at that time that the righteous and the wicked receive their reward for how they lived on earth. As I was thinking about this, it popped into my mind that one could make the argument that of all the false doctrines and teachings that the Christian church has put forward, the immortal soul could be the most devastating teaching ever to the cause of the Gospel of the Kingdom.

I realize that what I have said is debatable, and I welcome anyone who disagrees. One could say that the Trinity is more devastating because it runs contrary to what, among others, Moses (Deut. 6:4), Paul (1 Tim. 2:5; 1 Cor. 8:6) and Jesus (Mark 12:29-34; John 5:44; 17:3) say about who God is. How many Jews and Muslims have been turned off to the Gospel because of their perception that Christians worship three Gods? Would Hindus consider Jesus to be “just another god in the pantheon” if Jesus were properly taught as the human Son of God rather than God the Son? I have to agree with the title of one of Brother Anthony Buzzard’s books, that the doctrine of the Trinity is indeed a “self-inflicted wound.”

Or the doctrine of eternal security could be just as devastating, because it can potentially lead people to believe that they can do just as they wish and sin at any time, and they will still be forgiven and welcomed into glory. I remember years ago a skeptic once saying, “God will forgive me; that is His job.” Although this was spoken by a non-believer, I could easily see a believer in eternal security thinking and acting in this manner if he isn’t careful (this is not to say that *all* who believe in eternal security will act this way).

How about the doctrine of double predestination, one might ask? I can see it being just as devastating as the immortal soul, if not more so, because the idea that God selects some for salvation and condemns others to destruction does not give the impression of a God who wants all people to be saved (see, for example, Ezek. 18:23, 30-32; 1 Tim. 2:3-4; 2 Pet. 3:9). It gives the idea (perhaps unfairly in many cases) of God being a puppet

master, controlling the destinies of people on a whim (which is what, incidentally, the Koran, the holy book of Islam, teaches: see Surah 11:106-108; 17:18).

While all of the above is true, the doctrine of the immortal soul has to rank very high on the list of the most devastating doctrines that the churches have ever taught. There are nine reasons for me making this serious charge against this teaching (not in any order of importance):

First, the doctrine of the immortal soul gives man something that man never has or had. God said in Genesis 2:7 that man is the product of two things — the dust of the ground and the breath of life. Combine the two together, and as Genesis 2:7 says, man *became* a living soul. Note this carefully — that man *is* a soul, not that man *has* a soul. The reverse is shown in Ecclesiastes 12:7, when at death the dust returns to the ground where it came from, and the spirit (also translated “breath”) returns to God who gave it. However, what does the immortal soul doctrine teach? It does not teach that man is a soul as Genesis 2:7 says, but that man has an inherently immortal part of him which (sorry to be redundant) never dies. This seems to go hand in hand with what the Serpent told Eve in Genesis 3:4: “You will **not** surely die.” But this is not consistent with Genesis 2:7, or for that matter Genesis 3:19, which are the words of God. Are we going to believe the words of the Serpent (the Devil, Rev. 20:2), who says that you will not surely die, or the words of God, who says that you are dust and you will die because of your sin? If Eve (and Adam; Gen. 3:6 says that Adam was there when the temptation occurred) had listened to God instead of the Serpent, how much better would our world be?

Second, it dismisses on several levels the coming Kingdom of God and dismisses the importance of the resurrection of the dead, which the Bible continually tells us is the goal of all believers (Phil. 3:11). The immortal soul doctrine removes the focus on a new heaven and a *new earth* (Rev. 21:1), and instead aims the focus on the heavens as being the abode of the redeemed. This runs contrary to what God says in several passages. For example, God made the earth to be inhabited by men (Gen. 1:26-28). God has given the earth as the possession of men while the heavens have been reserved for Him (Ps. 115:16). The immortal soul doctrine, however, teaches that heaven (or hell), *not* the earth (at least not immediately) will be the dwelling of man. It diminishes the importance of the Bible’s teaching that the earth will be restored, and that God will be among us and be our God (Rev. 21:1, 3: note that we don’t go to God, but that God will come to us). It also diminishes the importance of God conquering death through the resurrection. After

all, why should I care a whit about my body being restored and living forever on the earth when I am already in heaven in the presence of God? And if I am consigned to hell, why would I care a bit about a new heavens and a new earth? Where is the promise that the wicked will receive a new body that will be able to live forever in the fire?

Third, it dismisses the Jewish roots of our faith by appealing to Greek philosophy rather than the Old Testament writers. It was the Greek and Hellenistic way of thinking that taught that man will live forever either in the heavens with the gods or in the depths of Hades in torment (it can also be argued that it was pagan thinking like this which led to Christians believing in a triune God). But the Old Testament writers did not write this way. Throughout the Bible, it says that those who died “rested with their fathers” (see the accounts of the deaths of the kings of Israel and Judah in 1 and 2 Kings as well as the Chronicles), which is a euphemism for death. Isaiah says of the future resurrection: “you who lie in the dust, wake up and shout for joy” (Isa. 26:19). Daniel says the same thing in Daniel 12:2: “multitudes who are sleeping in the dust of the earth will awake.” One must ask who is the “you who dwell in the dust” and who are the “multitudes sleeping in the dust of the earth” if immortal souls are already alive in heaven! Do immortal souls sleep? Jesus, in speaking about his friend Lazarus, said that “Lazarus has fallen asleep” (John 11:11), which he clarifies to his disciples: “Lazarus is dead” (John 11:14). Stephen, the first martyr for the Gospel, fell asleep when he died (Acts 7:60). Again I must ask, who is the “he” who fell asleep if his immortal soul went to heaven at that moment? Yet much of this, if not virtually all of this, was pushed to the side with the advent of Greek thinking and philosophy being brought in to churches to replace Jewish thought. One has to wonder how the history of the church and its relation with the Jews would have turned out differently if we had remained true to what the Hebrew Bible, the OT, taught about death as opposed to what the Greeks taught.

As a side note, if the immortal soul doctrine is true, then Lazarus should have been angry at Jesus for pulling him away from eternally worshipping God and being in His presence, and instead being yanked back to this sinful earth with all of its troubles and diseases. And as a purely hypothetical question, what would have happened if Lazarus had later fallen away from Christ and become a rebel against him? You would have a man who praised and rejoiced in God in heaven for four days, returned to earth by Jesus, fell away, and is now in hell, being tormented until the judgment (more on this later).

Fourth, the idea of folks roasting and burning in an everlasting hellfire drives people away from the Gospel, and rightly so. One of the major reasons that skeptics and atheists (both the scoffing, mocking kind, and the ordinary seeker) reject God’s existence is that they cannot

accept the idea that an all-loving and all-compassionate God would send people to a place where they would be roasted, tortured, and tormented consciously for all eternity, with no end ever. Not only do I not blame them for thinking this way, but it also runs entirely contrary to the Bible’s teaching on the destiny of the wicked. To list a few verses:

- Isaiah 66:24 (which Jesus likely alluded to in Mark 9:48): The prophet does *not* say that the righteous will go and look at the writhing, tortured souls of those who rebelled against God. The prophet says that they will go and look at the dead bodies of those who rebelled against God.

- Jeremiah 31:40: The ground where the refuse (including the dead bodies) was thrown out will be holy to the Lord God (note that the context of this verse must be the Kingdom, because the verse says that the city will *never again* be uprooted or demolished). What sense is there of the ground where there is an eternal hellfire tormenting the wicked being made holy to the Lord God? Is God going to make the area where immortal souls of the wicked are being tortured a holy place? How does one reconcile this with what Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9, that the wicked will be shut out from the presence of God?

- Daniel 12:2: The wicked, when raised, will be raised to shame and everlasting contempt. It doesn’t say everlasting torture or torment, but that the contempt for the wicked will never end.

- 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9: Jesus will punish the wicked with everlasting *destruction* (destruction of the coming age), not everlasting torment. Furthermore, they will be shut out from the presence of God. Only destruction can fulfill this statement; if the wicked are still living in hellfire, how can one argue that they will be shut out from God’s presence, since God is omnipresent?

And it should be noted, furthermore, that fire is not a *preserving* agent, but a *destroying* agent. Has anyone ever tossed a piece of paper into a fire? If so, were you able to take it out of the fire afterwards and read what was written on it? Of course not, because that is not what fire does. Fire destroys; it burns up and consumes. It does not preserve or keep material as is, whether paper or flesh.

In a presentation that he gave on why he gave up his belief in the Trinity, the late Brother Sid Hatch said (paraphrasing) that God does not believe in nonsense. While he was using this in the context of the nonsensical teaching that 1+1+1=1, I believe this can equally apply to the idea that fire can be a preservative rather than a destroyer. God does not act irrationally. God will not throw something in a fire to see it last forever, because that simply is not how fire operates, and that is not how God ordained that fire should operate.

Now, I understand the thought process of many Christians who object to the annihilation and destruction of the wicked, rather than eternal conscious torment. They

may say, “How can it be just for God not to torture a man like Hitler for all eternity because of his intentional mass murder of Jews and other folks? How can you say it is just for a man like Hitler not to be alive forever thinking about what he did?” While I do get where they are coming from, we must remember two things. First, it is God who decides what is just and unjust when it comes to the punishment of the wicked and the reward of the righteous. We do not decide this, and we have no right to impose on God our definition of justice when *He* is the one who determines this. We are to search for the truth, not to impose our truth on God. “God is just” (2 Thess. 1:6). Second, the argument can be turned around on the person who says this. “Is the 19-year-old boy who flat-out rejects Jesus as Lord yet lived a good and peaceful life, maybe sleeping with his girlfriend twice, not stealing a whole lot, listened to his parents almost all the time, etc., deserving of the same punishment as a man who systematically and deliberately murdered six million Jews?”

Fifth, it makes God to be a liar when He says that only the righteous will live forever. Jesus says four times in John 6, for instance, that those who belong to him will be raised up at the last day (verses 39, 40, 44, and 54). Have you ever heard a mainstream Christian teacher or pastor say, “Everyone will live forever; it’s just a matter of where you will live”? This statement comes from the belief in an immortal soul. Yet Romans 2:7 says that only those who persistently seek immortality and glory will gain eternal life. Note what Romans 2:7-8 does *not* say: “To those who persist in seeking God’s glory, He will give them eternal life in heaven, but to those who are self-seeking and hate the truth, He will give them eternal life in hell.” God will only give immortality to those who serve him and overcome the world. The immortal soul doctrine destroys this foundational teaching about the Kingdom of God.

Sixth, it *possibly* diverts people from the worship of God to the prayer to and possible worship of dead saints, especially the virgin Mary. Because of what Christ Jesus did for us, we do not need a mediator or a go-between besides him. Because of the death and resurrection of Christ, we can approach God’s throne and ask for mercy and grace (Heb. 4:16). The doctrine of the immortal soul, however, on many levels takes away the need or desire for just one mediator. Consider Roman Catholic doctrine. It teaches that the souls of the saints are in heaven now and we can pray to them (not worship them; let’s not set up a straw man by saying that Roman Catholics worship people in the same manner that they worship God) in order to gain a mediator of sorts between us and God the Father. I have heard that Catholics believe that the Virgin Mary is the mediator between us and Christ Jesus, giving her titles such as the “Queen of Heaven” (I would be scared to give any Christian figure that kind of a title, especially one that is not deserved; see Jer. 44:19). What happens to much of Roman Catholic doctrine if the

immortal soul is not truth? If Mary is asleep in the ground, awaiting the resurrection with the rest of believers (Heb. 11:39-40), what then are Catholics and others doing when they are praying to her or lighting candles in her honor?

Seventh, it makes death a friend to some rather than an enemy to all. The Bible continually refers to death as the enemy (1 Cor. 15:54-56, for example). Contrary to atheistic evolutionary teaching, death is the intruder. Man did not come into the world through death, but death came into the world through man (1 Cor. 15:21). Death is not natural in God’s economy. It even says that the Devil is the one who holds power over death (Heb. 2:14). Can anyone possibly say that something which the Devil holds power over can be a friend to anyone, even a believer? Yet according to the immortal soul doctrine, death is now a friend to those who believe in Christ! Where is it ever taught that death is a friend? It is one thing to say that even in the curse, there can be a blessing. For example, death can bring relief to the suffering and that, on a certain level, can be a good thing. But there is a *massive* difference between saying that God can use the curse to bring a blessing or relief, and saying that death is an actual friend! If death releases the immortal soul to be with God for eternity, how would it not be a friend in at least some sense?

Eighth, it creates the potential for looking at God’s physical creation as being a hindrance or even evil, rather than good. Earlier I mentioned the influence of Greek and Hellenistic thinking in the Christian church. One of the aspects of Greek philosophical thinking is the idea that matter is evil, that the spirit world is good, and that one should strive to shake off the material world in order to embrace the spiritual. This is especially dangerous to Christians since we do have calls from the Bible to be *in* this world but not *of* this world (see, for example, John 15:19; Rom. 12:2; 1 Thess. 4:1; and 1 John 2:15-17). If this is taken to an extreme, however, it can end up being the cause for rejecting what God has called good (1 Tim. 4:1-4; see also Ecc. 2:24-26; 3:12-13; 5:18-20; 9:7-10; 11:7-10). It could also *potentially* cause people to think that there is no need to take care of the world or anything in it, since after all, we are more than just our bodies. So who cares if we litter or intentionally pollute the air? We are just going to die anyway and our immortal souls will fly up to a place where there is no litter and there is always clean air. This runs contrary to what God told man to do — to rule over the earth, subdue it, and use it for His glory (Gen. 1:26-28). People too often use eschatological arguments as a basis, either explicitly or implicitly, for not worrying about what they do to the world, and the immortal soul can add to that basis, since it’s the spiritual that is good. Why then worry about what we do to the earth? This is *not* to say that people do believe this way; it is to say that the belief in the immortal soul can lead to this kind of thinking.

Ninth and last, it makes the final judgment of God nonsensical. Consider the following timeline: A man dies and goes to hell because of his sins and his unrepentant attitude. He is being tortured and tormented in eternal hellfire. Then, at some point in the future, he is yanked out of hell, stands before God, hears God's pronouncement of judgment on him, hears God's condemnation of him, and then is tossed back into eternal hellfire for all time. *Does this make any sense at all?* And how is this consistent with what the author of Hebrews wrote in 9:27: "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment..."? Jesus said in John 5:28-29 that there is a time when *all* who are in their graves will come out, some to the life of the age to come and some to judgment (one must ask again: Who are the "all" in the graves if their immortal souls are in heaven or hell?). There is *one* time for judgment. Yet according to the immortal soul doctrine, there are *two* times for judgment. How does this hold up against biblical truth?

Any one of these reasons would be bad enough and would be a hindrance to the true Gospel of the Kingdom. When you combine all nine of these reasons, however, it points to a terrible disservice and destruction of what should be a life-saving message — that God made this earth good, and, though it is badly marred by judgment because of our sin, He will one day restore it to what it should be; that Jesus died just as we do; that Jesus is alive just as one day we will be; and that Jesus will be the ruler of this world just as one day we will be (under Jesus, of course! Dan. 7:22, 27). We therefore have to ask ourselves a very important question: Are we going to listen to what the Scriptures say about who God is, who man is, and what our destiny is? Or are we going to listen to what the world says?

This is a question of authority, the authority of God vs. the authority of man.

The serpent said to Eve, "You will not die."

God says to us, "You will die, but one day you will live if you remain in Me and My Son."

Which is it going to be?

"I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God" (Job 19:25-26).

Never forget the simplicity of Psalm 37, verses 9, 11, 22, 29, 34, and for the wicked, verse 20. ✧

Is Jesus the Only "Christ" in the Bible?

By Pastor Yasser Gaitan, Nicaragua
(Translated by Carlos Xavier)

Is Jesus the only "Christ" in the Bible? The majority will surely respond with a resounding, "Yes!" However, the correct answer is NO. Jesus is not the only Christ who appears in the Bible.

Take into account the original languages in which the Scriptures were written, i.e., Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. There are some words that were not translated but transliterated. The word "Messiah" is one of those words, from the Hebrew *Mashiach*. In Greek it is *Christos*.

So what does Messiah or Christ mean? It means someone who has been anointed or selected by God as ruler, king (1 Kings 2:10-12). Hence, in the Bible there are many "messiahs."

Here are some examples:

- The temple priest (Lev. 4:3, 6, 16; 6:22)
- The patriarchs (Ps. 105:15; 1 Chron. 16:22)
- King Saul (1 Sam. 12:3, 5; 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; 2 Sam. 1:14, 16, 21); King David (2 Sam. 19:21; 22:51; 23:1; Ps. 18:50; 20:6; 28:8); King Solomon, once (2 Chron. 6:42)
- The pagan king Cyrus (Isa. 45:1)
- The future, Messianic figure (1 Sam. 2:10, 35; Ps. 2:2; 89:51; 132:10, 17; Dan. 9:25-26; Hab. 3:13)

As we can see, there are many "christs" who preceded Jesus, but he is the last "Christ." The title "Messiah" cannot mean God Himself, because the Messiah or Christ (anointed) is the *agent* of the One True God (John 17:3).

As the last and promised Messiah, Jesus is Prophet, Priest and King. That's because God the Father anointed him above all his predecessors, i.e., his "companions" (Heb. 1:9).

To conclude, Jesus is the ruler chosen by God to rule the earth. Jesus is the anointed (Christ) of God (Luke 9:20), the King of the world to come, the Kingdom of God on earth, which will be established at the visible parousia of Jesus from heaven.

It is for this reason that Jesus commands us to ask each day for the coming of the Kingdom of his God and Father (Matt. 6:10). This will be the end of this present evil age ruled by Satan and the beginning of the eternal age to come that will be full of peace and justice. ✧

“Praying Like Jesus: The Shema” by Dr. Les Hardin

Review and Commentary by Barbara Buzzard

Dr. Les Hardin is a Professor of New Testament at Johnson University, Florida. The following is a review of his presentation at the 2014 Piedmont Lectures at Dallas Christian College. His life’s work has been to discover what a serious study of the New Testament can teach us about what it means to be authentically spiritual. He says this: “I began to notice that a lot of what passes for ‘spirituality’ in the church is nothing more than personality theory sprinkled with holy water.”¹ Professor Hardin took a sabbatical for the express purpose of researching and writing on prayer, or as he puts it: deciphering what it means to genuinely communicate with God.

What is the most important verse in the Bible?

A list of eleven answers, according to denominations, comes as no surprise in its predictability. For example, Billy Graham would say the most important verse is John 3:16. But Professor Hardin asks this penetrating question: What would Jesus answer? We don’t have to wonder because Jesus *was* asked that question. His answer was this: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4-9). This is known as the Shema, Israel’s most formative and foundational creed, and Jesus identified it as the most important of all. He called it the Great Commandment.

The Shema

“So why is it that the Shema has such little importance, presence, or repetition in our Christian piety throughout the centuries?”² Hardin notes that he has been in church since he was two weeks old, but that he doesn’t remember the Shema ever being taught, explained, emphasized or, in fact, dealt with in any way. As a result of his research and writing³ he began to rethink this void. This was his discovery: “Jesus prayed The Shema twice a day, every day of his life.”⁴

When questioned about the summary of the Law, Jesus answered with what Scot McKnight has come to call the Jesus Creed:⁵ The Shema coupled with the amendment to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). I have included the insights of several others who have focused on this subject, although it is largely ignored by mainstream theologians.

¹ “Praying Like Jesus: The Shema,” Piedmont Lectures at Dallas Christian College, Dr. Les Hardin, p. 1, [https://www.dallas.edu/StudentLife/Forms/PiedmontLecture/Praying the Shema.pdf](https://www.dallas.edu/StudentLife/Forms/PiedmontLecture/Praying%20the%20Shema.pdf)

² *Ibid.*, p. 3

³ *The Spirituality of Jesus*, Dr. Les Hardin, pp. 26-38

“Traditionally Christian scholars haven’t placed much emphasis on The Shema as a faith-forming prayer. In my research on prayer and on The Shema in particular, I began to notice that a discussion of The Shema is largely absent from our collective Christian discussion of prayer. The thirteen-page entry on ‘Prayer’ in the *Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible* doesn’t have a single word to say about it...Maybe it’s because the Lord’s Prayer seems to have supplanted The Shema as the formulaic creed of the Christian church. Whatever the reason, it seems that Christians don’t find The Shema — at least as a form of prayer — important.”⁶ And yet it was a vital part of Jesus’ life!

The Creed of Jesus

“If this creed, and this prayer, was important to God’s people in the time of the Messiah, and important to the Messiah himself, then it’s imperative that we, as the people of God, give consideration to The Shema, not just as a creed, but as a prayer.”⁷ Professor Hardin asks what is in it to help us to pray and to worship? Implied in the Shema are the actions of learning, following and obeying in a putting-into-practice sense, i.e. if you have *heard* these words, you must obey them. There is an expectation of action due to listening. Listening entails/demands action.

Since salvation comes from the Jews (John 4:22), and since Jesus was a Jew and was totally blessed and approved of by God — ought we not look to this Jew as our example? After all, it was not God who was Jewish, but His Son!

Hardin suggests that we consider the Shema as a creed. I couldn’t agree more; there would be safety there, because that is Jesus’ creed. *However*, we would then have major collisions with the creeds which the churches have adopted since then, e.g. the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed. Could it really be that one would have to choose between Jesus and the church?

Creeds of the Churches

“The Athanasian Creed is a very instructive document, for it shows that when an attempt was made to state the Christian faith in terms of the metaphysic of the time, all that could be done was to set down a series of contradictions and say that you would be damned if you did not believe them...The first impression produced on the mind by hearing this doctrine of the Trinity is that it is quite incredible.”⁸

The truth is that these creeds *violate* the Shema. For Jesus, the Shema was the core principle. Can that be said

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others*, pp. 5-13

⁶ “Praying Like Jesus: The Shema,” p. 3-4

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4

⁸ *Christian Faith and Practice*, Eerdmans, 1950, pp. 78, 80

of the established church? How is it that if one does subscribe to Jesus' creed, one can be considered a heretic by the established church? How is it that we have neglected/overruled the greatest commandment of all?

"The Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut. 6:4). Professor Hardin: "Those of us in the Christian faith have traditionally read this as a Trinitarian statement; we believe that God is three-fold — Father, Son and Spirit — and this verse keeps us from believing that there are three gods...In context, though, that doesn't make very much sense, and this is the theological controversy over which barrels of printer ink have been spilt."⁹ (The wasted ink seems to pale by comparison to the **blood of the many** whose lives have been taken *because* they stood for God being one and *only* one, the Father.)

Hardin is correct in questioning what sense is to be found by saying that God is three-fold. Brave souls through the centuries have had the courage to question this logic. Some lived to write about it: "It might tend to moderation and in the end agreement, if we were industrious on all occasions to represent our own doctrine [the Trinity] as wholly unintelligible."¹⁰ Are we saying that the Master Logician, the One from whom all intelligence emanates, actually validates an *unintelligible* theory about who He is? Really?

The Constraints

If we are monotheists, certain things are required, but just as importantly, certain things are forbidden. There are constraints and prohibitions and restrictions in order to be true to the concept. One is not free to blur the lines. "The New Testament writers similarly are insistent about the absolute oneness of God, and show no tendency to describe Jesus in terms of divinity; the few apparent exceptions are either grammatically and textually uncertain or have an explanation which, as we shall see, brings them within the constraint of Jewish monotheism."¹¹

"The Church found itself in a dilemma as soon as it tried to harmonize the doctrine of the Deity of Jesus and the Deity of the Father with monotheism. For according to the NT witnesses, in the teaching of Jesus relative to the monotheism of the OT and Judaism, **there had been no element of change whatsoever. Mark 12:29ff. recorded the confirmation by Jesus himself, without any reservation, of the supreme monotheistic confession of faith of Israelite religion in its complete form. The means by which the Church sought to demonstrate the agreement of its dogma of the Deity**

of both Father and Son with monotheism, remained seriously uncertain and contradictory."¹²

Professor Hardin's answer to this great divide is that we are to worship Yahweh *alone*. But, with respect, this leads us into a dilemma because "The New Testament writers are really quite careful at this point. Jesus is not the God of Israel. He is not the Father. He is not Yahweh."¹³

Breaking the Shema

There is certainly no corroboration for the orthodox view of God as being three-in-one in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6: "There is no God but one...For us there is but one God, the Father." This Scripture is brilliant in its simplicity — the one God is the Father. Paul is repeating the Shema. The difficulty comes when the latter part of the verse adds "and one lord, Jesus Christ." With our western *non-recognition* that the term "lord" can go all the way from the gardener to God — we make major mistakes in our thinking. It is imperative that we know that Abigail referred to David as lord, that the gardener at the tomb was addressed as lord, that it commonly means "sir." It was the Gentile church which failed to distinguish the significance between "lord" as applied to Jesus and "LORD" as applied to God. Without this knowledge we imagine that Jesus is being called God, a disaster for us as we would have, at that point, two who are called God. That would constitute a breaking of the Shema. And a breaking of the Shema would be the greatest of crimes one could commit.

"For Jesus the Shema is evidently fundamentally determinative of the whole orientation of life...The implication is clear that for Jesus God alone is worthy of worship and of such devotion, because God alone is the source and definition of all goodness."¹⁴ When Jesus quotes the Shema, are we to believe that he was referring to himself when he said "The Lord *our* God is the one and only Lord"? (Mark 12:29).

What was Jesus' theology? "Jesus' words are so clear that no complicated linguistic techniques are needed to explain them. What Jesus states with crystal clarity is that there is only one God, the One he called 'Father,' and asked his disciples to call upon Him in the same way...Jesus speaks of himself as the one sent by 'the only true God.' It should therefore, have been perfectly obvious to anyone truly listening to what Jesus said that if the Father is the one and only true God, then no one else can also be God alongside Him."¹⁵

Sir Isaac Newton passionately desired to rid Christianity of its mythical doctrines, "this strange

⁹ "Praying Like Jesus," p. 6

¹⁰ Dr. Hey, *Lectures in Divinity*, 2, p. 235

¹¹ A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, The Bampton Lecture, 1980

¹² Dr. Martin Werner, *Formation of Christian Dogma*, 1957, p. 241.

¹³ James Dunn, *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus?* p. 142-144

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142-144

¹⁵ Eric H.H. Chang, *The Only True God: A Study of Biblical Monotheism*, p. 2

religion of ye West, the cult of three equal Gods.” He believed “the spurious doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity had been added to the creed by unscrupulous theologians in the fourth century.”¹⁶

The Benefits

A very interesting section of Hardin’s lecture is his discussion of the benefits of praying the Shema. Having been asked why he recited the Shema, he answered: “Because Jesus did. And I want to live like he did.” A great answer, I think, but why does it seem so foreign? Isn’t it because that core principle of Jesus has been erased, replaced, removed from the equation? Dare I say, it might even sound un-*Christian*!?

Hardin finds that praying the Shema focuses his attention on God and away from self, and he notes how selfish and how self-centered our prayers can be. Professor Dunn found this same benefit in recognizing who Jesus is: “This allows for a fuller recognition of the other emphases in the New Testament writings — Jesus as Jesus of Nazareth praying to God, Jesus as last Adam and eldest brother in God’s new creation family, Jesus as heavenly intercessor, or God as God of the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁷

Secondly, Hardin notes that the Greatest Commandment is communal, corporate and group-oriented. He then of necessity must label some of what we have in worship as shallow in the extreme, with worldviews that are narcissistic, individualized and custom made to suit. Hardin points out that the pronouns for humans in the Greatest Commandment are not singular but plural, and so he renders this possibility: “YHVH is OUR God. And y’all will love YHVH y’all’s God with all y’all’s heart, and all y’all’s soul and all y’all’s strength.” This certainly does make the point!

And as noted previously we should understand the importance of pronouns as when Jesus prayed, “The Lord *our* God.”

While I am very grateful for Professor Hardin’s emphasis on the Shema and praying like Jesus, his study raises an enormous question: How is it that Jesus — since he is thought to be God — prays? This would create a situation in which one God is praying to another — an impossibility.

Jesus never abandoned the Shema. It appears that the church has abandoned it. The fact that the church has not taught it is very serious.

“Christianity presupposes and takes for granted the Jewish belief in God. Its distinctive spiritual dynamic is lost whenever for practical purposes the living God of religion is lost behind the abstraction of philosophical

theology. And belief in the living God was the gift of Jews to the world.”¹⁸

The Problem Remains

“But the fundamental problem created by elevating Jesus to the level of deity is that a situation is created in which there are at least two persons who are both equally God; this brings trinitarianism into conflict with the monotheism of the Bible...In regard to the N.T. it is trinitarianism that is on trial; it will have to explain why it has taken the monotheistic Word of God and interpreted it in polytheistic terms, thereby utterly distorting its fundamental character.”¹⁹ Could it not be this distortion that is the reason for the disastrous disappearance of the Shema from our prayer lives?

Jesus was a thoroughgoing, monotheistic, Shema-reciting Jew. We have redefined the core principle inherent in the Shema. Is this valid? ✧

Comments

• “I am 50 years old and since my early teens was trying to understand the Trinity; I haven’t got it yet. I was born in a Catholic family in Pakistan. In my teens I started going to a Protestant church. In my 20s I started taking classes from a United Pentecostal Oneness pastor. I later attended an Assemblies of God church for a few years. I studied Islam extensively but was disappointed with their faith as well. After my own experience and studies I reached the conclusion that Jesus is not God Almighty. I have watched your video on youtube, ‘Five Options in Christology’ and was very impressed. I will try to read your books as well.” — *California*

• “I can’t adequately put in words how your teachings — articles, books, Youtube videos, live Youtube, emails have revolutionized (in a good and proper way) my understanding of the Bible. The Gospel of the Kingdom of God is like a map legend that explains the general theme of the Bible (the map).” — *Cameroon*

• “Congratulations on the article “It’s Not Fair” (July). I’ve often thought that God is not fair in the eyes of the world. In fact God is a raving racist, homophobe, Islamophobe, etc. — in the eyes of the world.” — *Minnesota*

“From the masterful biblical/historical presentations, to relevant wake-up calls (like the shocking abortion presentation), to the organizational set-up behind the scenes, I believe this (online) Theological Conference was such a godly, timely event. The world’s knowledge of an authentic Kingdom of God perspective would be lacking if not for your efforts, which are NOT in vain (1 Cor. 15:58), despite the rampant falsity in the world to muddle and downplay Jesus’ essential Gospel!” — *Texas*

¹⁶ Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God*, p. 69

¹⁷ *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus?* p. 142-144

¹⁸ Dr. Rawlinson, *Essays on the Trinity and The Incarnation*, p. 3

¹⁹ *The Only True God*, pp. 4, 30