

Focus on the Kingdom

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Anthony Buzzard, editor

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Disclaimer City: Questioning Modern Pentecostal Roots

by Kenneth LaPrade, Texas

Before delving into more detailed, relevant studies in future writings, I believe it might be wise to clarify some basic factors about my journey and my perspectives. I am someone who has undergone several major upheavals in recent years — **after** having settled into several comfortable, theological grooves for decades. Certain areas of my understanding have been drastically revamped through anguished, painful struggles. In some cases, I have intellectually wrestled to ditch certain persistent paradigms (upon seeing their errors), while realizing that I still faced challenges to incorporate such changes in honest, practical living from the heart — in obedience to Jesus.

Like many others, I spent my young adult years deeply engrossed in a bold, enthusiastic, evangelical mindset. In my case, this was in the Way International, rooted in a blend of unitary monotheism, sound belief in the sleep of the dead, overt dispensationalism, and a highly specific version of experiential Pentecostalism. When I initially became cognizant of certain flaws in my background (in 1996-1997), I honestly assumed that these apparent “low hurdles” (in several ideas) involved the minor tweaking of a few casual misunderstandings. When further, larger hurdles kept wildly cropping up in subsequent years, it dawned on me quite gradually that severe barricades to genuine, biblical faith needed to be overcome — if I were to become authentic. The problems of my previous thinking patterns were **not** simply superficial; they were dangerously destructive (I later realized), and all this made me aware that deep down there were horribly twisted, rotten roots.

During these last twenty-two years of wrestling with stark changes, I have never been unthankful that certain valuable truths (like unitary monotheism) were learned by me and others in my old group many decades ago. I do not ever disdain anyone’s kind friendship, even if total agreement about key issues might be a strenuous work in progress. Presently, I consistently believe that open dialogue about potential disagreements is a very **good** thing! I don’t believe at all that anger and standoffishness (due to disparity in views) leads to mutual edification and harmony. I say that while keenly realizing that the spiritual battle we all face involves discerning the strange attacks of stubborn-hearted divisiveness, and the ongoing stress of how to wisely, lovingly deal with them.

I don’t believe that folks who might be slower than others to emerge from certain past misunderstandings are necessarily less intelligent, less believing, or less “spiritual” than other people. I don’t believe that arrogantly giving up on praying for slow-learning people (as I have undoubtedly been) would be a Christian response in dealing with anyone.

I also don’t believe that loud, coercive “shock and awe” yelling (a very typical, worldly “leadership” tactic which was quite prominent in my old religious background) is helpful to anyone! Among other things, such popular ranting and raving is in direct **contradiction** to Jesus’ superb model, and his insistent teachings that we **serve** others with gentleness, to persuade others with cautious, painstaking humility. In Luke 22:24-27 and 2 Timothy 2:24-26 (among many similar passages), this loving truth is emphasized quite beautifully. I believe that it is vital to keep these things in mind in the middle of a devious, trigger-happy world of contention. Even among Christians who, sadly, are prone to using impatient methods to “set each other straight,” diligent trust to follow Jesus (and avoid coercion) must be a priority.

So, in summarizing and synthesizing some of these “disclaimer” factors, as I anticipate some potential misconceptions about my decision to assert a few observations about modern Pentecostalism, I do not “bash” any folks at all. I write as an “insider,” in terms of having had fervent Pentecostal experiences, at some level, for 45 years. My starkly changed perspective stems from several clues that have developed gradually, over more than a couple of decades.

By the way, the subject of “Pentecostalism” is far more complex than might meet the eye. I do not pretend to be qualified to address all aspects of such a broad topic, nor do I disparage the views of any who would differ with my perspectives. Some might like to reduce the entire issue of “gifts of the spirit” or spiritual “manifestations” to choosing between two alternatives: (1) a cut and dried insistence on “cessationism” (i.e. the gifts ceased in the first or second century) or (2) a full-blown 2,000 year continuation of all the gifts, all evidences, etc., that are mentioned in new covenant writings (plus some “new,” innovative spiritual experiences). I presently view both polar extreme alternatives, (1) and (2), as misleading options.

As a possible illustration, picture a bowling alley with 26 lanes, each labeled with a different letter of the English alphabet. We will pretend that the hypothetically perfect balance is right between lanes “M” and “N,” with

13 lanes to the left and 13 lanes to the right. “A” represents the extreme of exuberant, “anything goes” modern Pentecostalism, promoting (along with the gifts mentioned in the Bible) “slain in the spirit,” snake handling, rolling on the floor, laughing hysterically... And the list goes on and on.

By the way, in my opinion, the extreme “A” end of the spectrum could equally include: (1) those who (despite real historical evidence) assert that **all** spiritual gifts (including “tongues”) have been received and practiced constantly by genuine Christians for the bulk of two millennia; AND also (2) those who subscribe to some sort of “latter rain” theology, in which it is asserted that (perhaps in 1901 in Kansas) there was a modern outpouring of holy spirit (sort of parallel to the Acts 2 Day of Pentecost outpouring) in which “tongues” was newly given as a modern revival sign of the fast approaching of “last days” leading up to Jesus’ return. Unlimited access and enjoyment of “spiritual gifts” by possibly **all** is where lane A is rolling.

“Z” then represents the opposite extreme of severe skepticism. Bible-reading people at “Z” do not dare to even pray for specific results, since they have been indoctrinated to think that God would not answer a prayer for healing or for guidance in modern times. “Z” would be an absolute denial that God could and would intervene in remarkable, special ways — since the era of the first-century Apostles. Frankly, I have never been at either “A” or “Z,” even though my previous mindset might have been at “B” or “C,” which I now perceive as far out of balance.

Having said these preliminary things, I **do** believe it is entirely appropriate to carefully **compare** Bible records with what is audaciously asserted in modern times, since about 1901 — when modern Pentecostalism really got its start. Also, I don’t believe it is out of balance at all to target one prominently emphasized “gift” or manifestation — like “speaking in tongues” — and carefully hone in on its specific biblical purposes and first-century uses, while **truly** comparing that ancient reality of speaking in **bona-fide languages** with modern doctrines and practices. Why not? Why not study it meticulously? For those interested, I hope (God willing, slowly, bit by bit) that I will present some biblical perspectives, some historical information, and a few anecdotal observations during the coming months and/or years. It’s just food for thought.

Emotional bias should not really be a factor in perusing the evidence in these important matters. In stating this, I **know deeply** that avoiding emotional bias is much easier to talk about than to put into practice! Why did I not proactively question my own “speaking in tongues” experiences for 45 years? Concurrent with most of that time, why did I constantly disregard the lucid Scriptural truth to get baptized (plunged in water to identify with Christ) and enter the Christian community

according to God’s method, as commanded by Jesus? Overwhelming emotional biases (rooted in strong feelings linked to previous indoctrinations and vivid experiences) were so thickly embedded in my psyche that you could have cut them with a knife! You should **not** take my word for anything in all of this. But maybe humbly checking out certain evidence would not be a bad idea.

It is often very hard for any of us to perceive how **tenaciously** a way of thinking can linger through well-hidden emotional biases, unless one has actually been in the shoes of the spiritually misled. When I speak of people being misled or being misleading, I do so with the total empathy of realizing that most misled (and misleading) folks are very **sincere**; they do not **deliberately** engage in getting hoodwinked, or, consequently, hoodwinking others.

Since **all** of us (who are honest) can remember having been slyly deceived in the past by certain dubious influences, we should be compassionate toward others, whose strange-seeming struggles do not necessarily coincide with our own personal glitches. What currently pops out as A, B, C — a logical sequence leading to obvious conclusive evidence for **me** — might be wildly baffling to another from a distinct tradition, and vice versa. Because of how such tenacious emotional biases can pervasively be at play, what might seem like deliberate stubbornness in a person might not be intentional obstinacy at all, even when folks defend themselves (and their errors) aggressively. Maybe, he or she simply fails to truly “get” a valid point that is crystal clear to another person.

As should be obvious to all who care about bearing authentic fruit, the point of exploring some potential errors in modern Pentecostalism is **not** to squabble and be nitpicky over insignificant matters; it is not to be contentious over topics that might be ambiguous. It is certainly not to pit Kingdom-focused folks from one group against another group with a distinct view. It is not so that someone can proudly tout having the “moral high ground” (or some sort of intellectual/spiritual high-ground) over others.

Let’s think calmly about authentic fruit, which was so emphasized by Jesus. What if **I** (along with others) were to be so zealous, with well-intentioned excitement over experiential “spiritual manifestations,” that we **unintentionally** encourage others to place false confidence in bogus evidence? You might reply, “Well, so what? What’s the difference?” However, what if we were to inadvertently lead others to place and **exalt** experienced-based faith (with its effervescent feelings) **above** Scriptural integrity, while, ironically, proclaiming a sincere conviction that we represent Bible-based faith? Could misplaced confidence in dubious practical experiences be more dangerous than merely subscribing casually to minor misunderstandings? Could such errors

guide many people into major **disobedience**, in terms of failing to produce godly fruit? (As I say this here and in the following paragraph, I am not implying that God will be implacably unforgiving toward naïve, mistaken ones in future judgments.)

Notwithstanding, when one honestly comes to the place of dispensing with the “leaven” of dispensationalism, eventually he or she should perceive that Matthew 7 (the last part of Jesus’ initial set of instructions) is vital for Christians, who should imbibe its message with humble, God-fearing hearts. After warning phrases about entering the “narrow gate” (not the wide gate of easy believe-ism), and comments about discerning false prophets “who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves,” and the keen reminders about assessing the differences between good fruit and rotten fruit (as with trees/plants), Jesus, in a sense, hits a final home run (out of the ballpark!) for all Christians to diligently keep in mind!

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘lord, lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but he who does [practices] the will of my Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to me on that day, ‘lord, lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in your name perform many miracles [mighty works]?’ And then I [Jesus] will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness’” (Matt. 7:21-23).

Of course, the analogy to houses built on two foundations follows; both builders **heard** Jesus’ instructions, but only the successful one **understood and acted on Jesus’ words**.

Without getting too theological here, the passage in Matthew 7 does not state or imply that the **many** who approach Jesus saying “lord, lord” will **all** merely be deliberately insincere hucksters! The plea of “lord, lord” seems to be deeply heartfelt. Why, in the context, would Jesus warn Christians urgently about the importance of discerning slippery fruit (and its bogus, hidden “wolf” sources) if danger in future judgments merely involves intentional frauds? But these “many” here have clearly deceived themselves (in the context of Matt. 7), by using spiritual gifts as decisive evidence of faithfulness — while being guilty of merely hearing Jesus’ words and **not** acting on them in a faithful way. (See James 1:21-27 for a very similar assessment about this type of self-deception!)

Also, as far as I can tell, this negative judgment in Matthew 7 could equally apply to two groups: to those who really manifested God’s spiritual gifts (but then failed to stay obediently faithful), as well as to those who were deceived by false, fruitless prophets to trust **counterfeit** spiritual evidence (while being tricked into being lax regarding constant obedient behavior!). In either case, we Christians are definitely warned by Jesus’ “grand slam home run” conclusion to the sermon on the

mount! We should rejoice with God-fearing reverence that Jesus did not leave us in the lurch about the life-saving, obedient nature of his Kingdom calling! It’s God’s good pleasure to give us His Kingdom — but strictly on His terms!

In light of increasingly undeniable evidence experienced, remembered, and studied (by me), here are some things I have been challenged to seriously contemplate, repeatedly, over the last few years now, in terms of re-evaluating my background foundational paradigm (going back about 47 years). What if manmade approaches (along with over-the-top, confident assertions) to practice modern “speaking in tongues” were simply not right? What if getting folks to breathe deeply, reflect on the mechanics of speech, and then **act** — by boldly vocalizing syllable sounds — have **nothing to do** with what was being done in Acts (and as discussed in 1 Corinthians)? What if 1 Corinthians 12:27-30 (in its context) provides lucid indicators that speaking in languages is **not (and never was)** an inherent ability given to *all* Christians — as an irrefutable proof that they have been “baptized in holy spirit”?

On top of these questions, upon pondering the biblical fact that holy spirit is given only to those committed to obeying Jesus (Acts 5:32; Heb. 5:9), I had to ask myself the following questions: In such a severely dispensational atmosphere as my background, in which the four gospels were wrongly relegated to a status of pre-Christian, old covenant instructions (“not addressed” to Christians), did it make a lick of sense to assume that God Himself was backing up a false gospel with genuine powerful signs (like tongues), miracles, and wonders? Keep in mind, please, that (in the Way International) strict dispensational disavowal of a responsibility to repent, be baptized, and **obey Jesus’ words** was being gleefully coupled with a bold presumption about an automatic “born again” formula for easy, permanent salvation — **fused** with instant access to “walking by all nine [manifestations], all the time!” Does that make any sense at all? If we were blindly led to disparage Jesus’ *teachings*, as if they were totally **nonessential** for salvation, were we really filled powerfully with holy spirit? Once again, does that scenario make a bit of sense? Just reflecting briefly on my past devious root trends makes my metaphorical fruit detector flip far into the red zone! I don’t believe I am the only person from my past roots who should reflect on these logical inconsistencies.

Furthermore, what if my many years of practicing and observing vocalized sound patterns (somewhat language-like) that were far **too** repetitive, far **too** mimicking of others’ patterns, and far **too** inconsistent with how **real languages** work, were indicators of mere gibberish being spoken? (Keep in mind, please, that I adamantly refused to even entertain doubts like these for

at least four decades!) Also, what if the last 118 years of systematic efforts to record “tongues,” jotting down syllable sounds and later audio recordings with electronic equipment (which consistently revealed pure gibberish), are relevant documentation of evidence — solid, worthwhile evidence to take into serious consideration? (Once again, I write as one who was entrenched in the modern “tongues” movement without doubts for decades!)

On top of that, what if hazy mental connections about dubious “tongues” — as linked to twisted “eternal security” assumptions — were to actively lead many 21st-century “once saved always saved” folks to follow the distorted theologies of false prophets, who might openly reject biblical baptism and give little or no attention to needful, obedient behavior? Could the impact of such trickery influence many toward being rejected from entering God’s Kingdom, while sincerely saying, “lord, lord”? At what risk do we casually go along with dubious, feel-good spirituality? Is it worth it?

What I am stating here should **at least be relevant** to folks emerging from my specific traditions, if not to all people from other Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Third Wave backgrounds. Logically speaking, if mere gibberish is spoken out loud in a meeting, and then supposedly “interpreted” in a known language, **no real fruit** for God (or from God) is being produced, even if sincere folks enthusiastically believe it. Ultimately, no lie is of the truth.

After decades of practicing such “manifestations” and zealously leading others into it (including my own young children), I am resolved now to be very cautious. I did these dubious things mostly before learning to practice Jesus’ teachings. I formerly experienced great fear that if I were to question my Pentecostal roots, I would be betraying my foundational Christian faith since 1972. I now believe, to the contrary, that if I were to retain an adherence to doubtful, “spiritual” evidence, an unbiblical version of “baptism in holy spirit,” I would be betraying Jesus’ alarming Matthew 7 warnings — and tragically leading others into the same dilemma. ✧

Thinking about the Trinity

“The Trinity is held as a mere dogma, or form of words, not as a reality...They do not believe it, but rather believe that they ought to believe it. There are certain texts in Scripture which seem to assert it, certain elaborate arguments which appear convincing and irrefutable. On the strength of these texts and these arguments, they believe that they ought to believe it...If it should cease to be preached for a few years in Orthodox pulpits, it would cease to be believed; it would drop out of the faith, or rather out of the creed, of the community. Unitarianism has extended itself, without being preached, from the simple reading of the Bible. Here, in Massachusetts, the ministers left off preaching

the Trinity, and the consequence was that the people became Unitarian. Unitarianism in New England was not diffused by preaching; it came of itself, as soon as the clergy left off preaching the Trinity...

“It is also charged against the doctrine of the Trinity ‘that it is a contradiction in terms, and therefore essentially incredible.’ To this it is replied that it would be a contradiction if God were called Three *in the same sense* in which he is called One but not otherwise...We therefore proceed to ask, In what sense is he called Three, and in what sense is he called One? The answer is, the Unity is of essence or substance; the Trinity is of persons...But the difficulty is to know what is meant by the word ‘person.’ We are expressly informed that this term is not used in its usual sense...

“When we ask, What do you mean by ‘the Three’?...the answers are: 1. We mean three somethings, which we cannot define. 2. We mean three Persons, like Peter, James and John...It is a mystery. It is above reason...So Augustine said long ago, ‘We say three Persons, not because we have anything to say, but because we want to say something.’ But if one uses the phrase ‘three Persons’ and refuses to define it positively, merely defining it negatively, saying, ‘It does not mean this, and it does not mean that, and I don’t know what it does mean,’ he avoids, it is true, the difficulties, and escapes the objections; but he does it by giving up the article of faith. No one can deny that there *may be* three unknown distinctions in the divine nature; but no one can be asked to believe in them till he is told what they are. To say, therefore, that the Trinity is a mystery is to abandon it as an article of faith and make of it only a subject of speculation...

“This fact is not sufficiently considered by Trinitarians. They first demand of us to believe the doctrine of the Trinity, and when pressed to state the doctrine distinctly, retire into the protection of mystery, and decline giving any distinct account of it...No human being ever *believed*, or could *believe*, a mystery any more than he could see anything invisible or hear anything inaudible. To believe a doctrine, the first condition is that all its terms shall be distinct and intelligible.”¹

Ask your friends if the following propositions are intelligible. The doctrine of the Trinity appears in its most developed form in what is called the Athanasian Creed. It was not written by Athanasius, but by someone in the fifth or sixth century: “Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith unless every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity; neither confounding the

¹ James Freeman Clarke, *Orthodoxy: Its Truths and Errors*, 1880, p. 440-443.

Persons, nor dividing the Essence...The Father is eternal, the Son eternal and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet they are not three eternals but one eternal...So likewise the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty, and the Holy Spirit Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighties, but one Almighty. So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Spirit Lord. And yet not three Lords, but one Lord...For as we are compelled by the Christian truth to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord, so we are forbidden by the catholic religion to say, there are three Gods, or three Lords...All three persons are coeternal and coequal. So that everywhere we must worship the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity. He therefore that will be saved, let him thus think of the Trinity.”

It is hard to resist such threatening nonsense! ✧

Comments

- “I have to admit it was thanks to you over 2 years ago who made me aware of the common sense that if Jesus is God, that would simply = 2 Gods, and three Gods if the Spirit is a separate being. It was then after reading and understanding Jesus correctly in John 17:3 that proved to me God the Father is the only true God alone, and from there all the Trinitarian contradictions started to disappear.” — *Youtube*

- “I want to thank you for the difference you have made in my life and also the men that I have been honored to share the truth that you have shared with me, in this ‘mission field’ (prison). The men in our Bible study group (we call ourselves ‘Bereans’) are working hard and asking many, many questions, which I encourage. I want them to know why they believe what they believe and can back it up from the Bible. I want to help these men get rooted.” — *North Carolina*

- “First of all, thank you from the bottom of my heart for all you do for the Christian community. I have recently discovered you — about 8 weeks ago — and have been reading and watching much of your teachings. I commented on one of your live events that I’ve been ‘binge reading’ everything on your site since I am currently a Jehovah’s Witness trying to exit. What you teach really resonates with me. You have become my remote pastor and you didn’t even know it. Some of the things that attracted me to the JW’s were: 1) God was not triune, 2) the condition of the dead — they are asleep awaiting resurrection, 3) no eternal hell fire, 4) God has a personal name, 5) Jesus was His Son and our savior. Once I learned these things and saw how radically different they were from what I understood from my family and upbringing, I was hooked, so to speak, and then stopped questioning and just went along with whatever new concepts were taught. They had my full trust. When I realized that what I have been a part of for

30 years was not ‘the truth,’ I was quite frankly scared. What do I do now? Is the truth out there? I began to question everything. So I started searching and studying to reestablish what the Bible said about my beliefs one by one. And that search led me to you. So much of what you teach resonates with me and what attracted me to *some* of the JW teachings.” — *email*

- “Just wanted to say that I just finished reading the September 2019 issue of *Focus on the Kingdom*. What a great read it was! I enjoyed it thoroughly. It burns my heart greatly that the good news of the Kingdom has been obscured greatly. I’ve expanded my ministry to twitter last year (@GoodNews_KOG) and it’s so frustrating when I try to explain this to fellow Christians. I’ve never felt such a joy in my heart knowing this knowledge of the Kingdom, but at the same time my heart is crushed seeing the ignorance of my peers. People can be so stiff-necked towards the truth and hold so tightly to their traditions that it leaves me puzzled. I’m looking for other ways to expand my ministry. I even started making t-shirts with Kingdom messages printed on them!” — *Florida*

- “I have just been witnessing [in prison]. There may be a lot of rejection but seed is being planted. There is one guy who believed in the Trinity, and now after reading *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity’s Self-Inflicted Wound* he no longer believes in the Trinity. Praise God! There is another young man who I’m talking to who believes that Jesus is God. Please pray that his eyes get opened and he sees that Jesus is not God but the Son of God. He has been meeting with us in our Bible study.” — *Ohio*

- “Once again I thank you for the wonderful messages you and others post in the *Focus*. It is now 73 years since I got away from the Trinity. I must say that the *Focus* was a wonderful help clearing some small subjects that from time to time came up.” — *England*

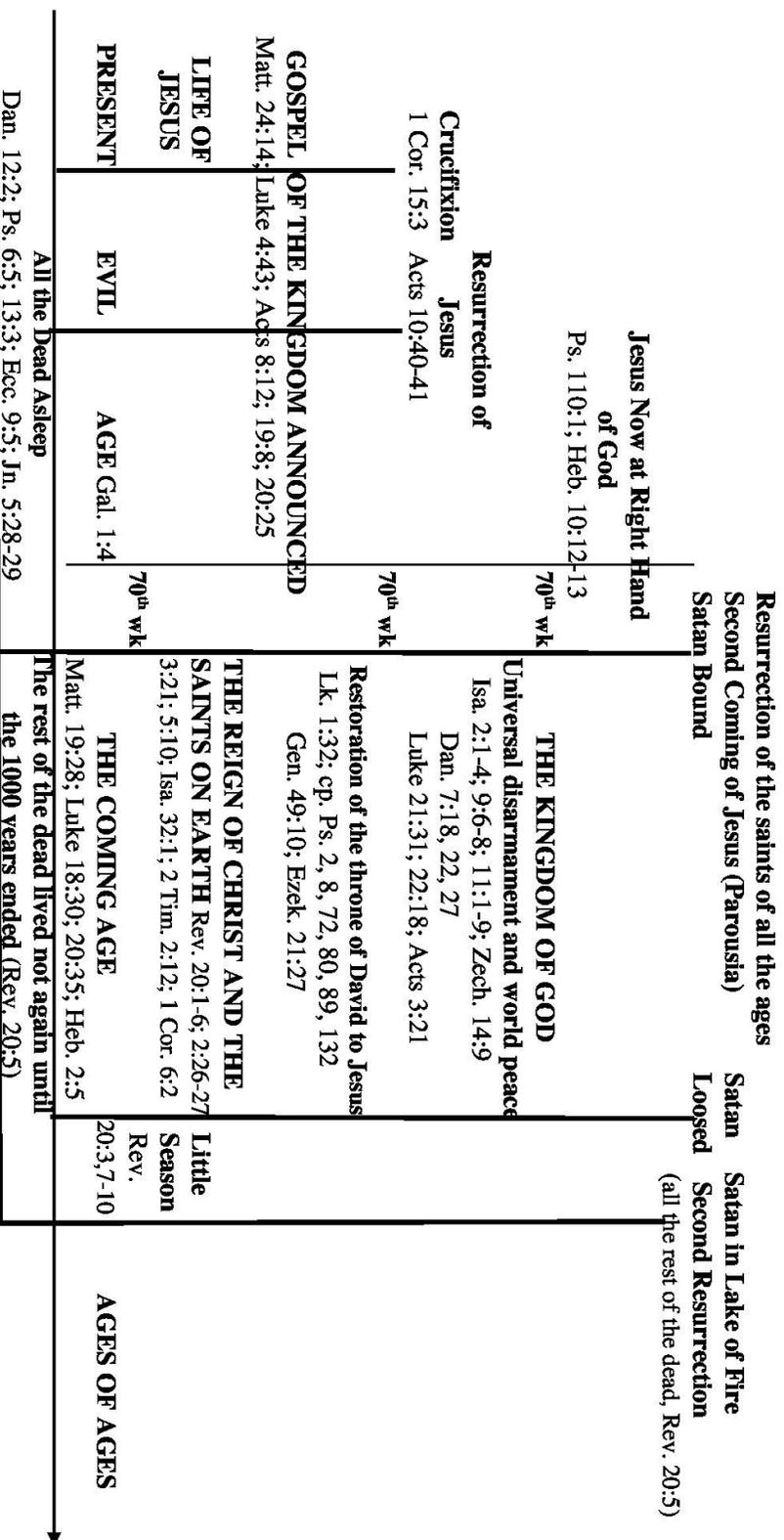
Australia Trip

We plan to visit Australia from November 25 through December 6. We will be in Sydney (Liverpool), and then Melbourne for the weekend of November 29-December 1, at the Christian Disciples Church in Box Hill on Saturday and Sunday (www.christiandiscipleschurch.org/content/australia). Please email us at anthonybuzzard@mindspring.com and we will provide more details as they become available.

I used the following charts over the 35 years or so teaching at Atlanta Bible College. I hope to summarize some of the central, foundational teachings of Jesus and the New Testament — Christianity as it was in the first century. Please use these verses as you teach others to understand the Bible plan — **the Plan for Man.**

THE CHRISTIAN GOOD NEWS

Luke 4:43; 8:1; Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:24-25; 28:23, 31



The Immortality Plan
How to Gain Indestructible Life =
 The Life of the Age to Come (**Dan. 12:2**); Immortality (**2 Tim. 1:10**)
from the Seed (Luke 8:11-12; 1 Pet. 1:23; 1 John 3:9)

Jesus' Saving Gospel about the Kingdom
 2 Pet. 1:4: Promises/Words which confer the divine nature
 Gal. 3:8: the Gospel preached to Abraham. Cp. Gen 22:18: obedience and blessing
 Heb. 5:9: Salvation is for those who obey Jesus
 Romans 1:5; 16:26: the obedience of faith
 Obeying Jesus (1 Pet. 1:2; Zech. 7:12)

