

Do Christians Follow Christ?

by Anthony Buzzard

The question may seem odd. My object is to call attention to the glaring difference between the terminology of believers and the language of Jesus in the matter of defining the Christian hope. We would think that those who claim Jesus as Lord would carefully follow his example as a teacher and speak of their destiny in exactly the way Jesus did.

But churchgoers do not do this. They refer to the goal of the Christian life in completely different terms from the Bible, which they claim as the source of true faith. This will alert intelligent Christians to a simple fact: a radical change of language and thinking has somehow intervened between us and Jesus. We are not talking as Jesus always talked about the very object of being a believer. A return to the Bible is called for.

On every hand we hear church members speak of “going to heaven,” having the “hope of heaven,” desiring to meet relatives “in heaven.” Evangelists commonly approach unbelievers with the question: “If you died today would you be certain of going to heaven?” This sort of vocabulary is without support in the Bible — a fact recognized by New Testament scholars. Why then is nothing done to bring our thinking and speaking into line with Jesus?

William Strawson, a tutor in Systematic Theology and the Philosophy of Religion, made a detailed study of *Jesus and the Future Life*, and dedicated 23 pages to an examination of the word “heaven” in Matthew, Mark and Luke. He concluded:

In few, if any, instances of the use of the word “heaven” in the synoptic gospels is *there any parallel with modern usage*. The gospel records of our Lord’s life and teaching do not speak of “going to heaven,” as a modern believer so naturally does. Rather the emphasis is on that which is “heavenly” coming down to man....Our modern way of speaking of life with God as being life “in heaven” is not the way the gospels speak of the matter. *Especially is there no suggestion that Jesus is offering to his disciples the certainty of “heaven” after this life.*¹

Thousands upon thousands of sermons have been preached in which non-biblical language about heaven perpetuates a fundamental misunderstanding about the after-life — a fundamental misunderstanding about the whole revealed purpose of God. A glance at the teaching of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament reveals that what we call “heaven” he called the Kingdom of God *on earth*: “Blessed are the meek, for they will have **the earth** as their inheritance” (Matt. 5:5). It would be hard to imagine a more effective way of contradicting the teaching of Jesus than to be constantly promoting “heaven” as the Christian reward. A man in Jesus’ audience asked him, “What should I do **to gain eternal life [the life of the age to come]**?” (defined as we have seen as “inheriting the earth”). Jesus replied, “If you want to **enter life** [not ‘go to heaven’] keep the commandments...It will be hard for a rich man to **enter the**

¹ William Strawson, *Jesus and the Future Life*, 1959, p. 38, emphasis added.

Kingdom of God” (Matt. 19:16, 17, 24; Luke 18:18, 24). Jesus then described the Christian objective specifically:

“When the world is reborn and the Son of Man will sit on his throne of glory, you too will sit on twelve thrones to govern the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30).

The promise of royal office, *on earth* when Christ returns, was offered to the Apostles and later extended to the whole church:

“To the one who overcomes and continues in my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron...just as I received the right to rule from my Father...[Jesus] has made [the believers of all nations] into a kingdom of priests to our God, and they will **reign as kings on the earth**” (Rev. 2:26; 5:10; cp. Rev. 3:21; 20:1-6; 2 Tim. 2:12; 1 Cor. 6:2).

The chorus of voices presenting “heaven” as the object of being a Christian do not represent the authentic voice of Jesus. An (unconscious) conspiracy seems to hide the reality of the Christian hope from believers who, under the pressure of such persistent indoctrination, imagine that “heaven” is the reward of the faithful, according to Scripture. A careful investigation of the New Testament will show that it is not. Christians in the Bible always spoke of “inheriting the Kingdom” on the earth, never of “going to heaven.”

A revolution is needed in our speaking, thinking and Bible study. Perhaps the remark of a leading New Testament scholar will be able to startle believers into following Jesus more accurately. J.A.T. Robinson observed that:

“‘Heaven’ is never in fact used in the Bible for the destination of the dying.”²

It is an easy matter to verify the correctness of his statement. It has been said often enough in standard works describing the Bible.

² J.A.T. Robinson, *In the End God*, p. 104.