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Reforming the Reformation

These remarks are designed to reflect on my own learning experience and to offer some insight on the pressing need for an ongoing Reformation. That is what “Anabaptists,” the people of the Radical Reformation, have always believed to be their God-appointed duty. I think that the Abrahamic movement set the pace for a new approach to understanding Jesus and the Bible. It is our duty to preserve those gains and build on them.

It has now been some 46 years since I was urged to attend a “get saved” meeting at Oxford and following that event began for the first time in my life actually to read and study the Bible. Some of those 46 years have been anything but delightful, because the world of religion is really a minefield. Deception is rife and traps are laid everywhere. But God has been merciful and afforded opportunities for reading, writing, travel and reflection as well as the joy of sharing one’s findings with students via radio and with those coming to ABC from various backgrounds and with varied faith stories.

The mainstream of the Reformation of the 16th century, I believe, did not penetrate deeply enough into the problems of post-biblical Christianity and despite heroic efforts to return to “the faith once and for all delivered” there remained large sections of the theology of Jesus which were not successfully restored to the public. The results in fragmentation and multiple denominations point to the fact that all is not well with “the system.” And the 95% non-attendance at church of my countrymen in the UK signals the fact that “church” as it now is seems largely irrelevant. So it was to me in my boarding school days, when R.E. (religious education) was the one school subject that none of us really took seriously. We had not understood that Christianity involves the science of religion, Jesus claiming to be the all-time Master of this difficult but immensely rewarding field known at Oxford and Cambridge as “the queen of the sciences.” If people really knew that Jesus offers them the elixir of life, indestructible existence, would they not hang on his every word?

Anyone who has been touched, even shocked and thus radically redirected, by the life and teaching of the Messiah cannot remain passive or silent. There is no story like the Bible story — that most often purchased and yet least read library of sacred literature. It is a riveting piece, because in it Jesus claims to be in possession of the key to life in perpetuity. That staggering claim is effectively negated when churchgoers are taught the Platonic myth that they already possess an immortal soul.

It has been a joy to be allowed to take part in the so-called Abrahamic movement. If I have understood the Abrahamic Faith correctly, I believe its rock foundation is the Bible – I mean the Bible read at face value, taking words in their *normal* and never in a “mystical” sense (except where Jewish language habits of the first century compel us to look for the normal *Hebrew* meanings of words and phrases, not Western 20th-century ones). Our approach to the Scriptures is that of historical science. Jesus must be understood within his own culture, as a Jew rooted in the Hebrew Bible and not Greek philosophy. To grasp the meaning of Jesus’ words we must be sympathetic to his

vocabulary, just as if you want to understand a Brit telling you that he is “mad about his flat” you must adjust yourself to what *he* and not you mean by those words.

Robert Hach has articulated so well for us the fact that faith = belief, and belief in the Bible means repenting by responding intelligently to the *words* of the Messiah about the Kingdom of God. His book contrasting the deceptive form of religion, “possession,” with the biblical version, “persuasion,” assists us to make sense of our journeys of faith and alerts us to the urgent work we need to do make the biblical Jesus known. Many of us were “possessed” rather than persuaded. Never again!

How the Reformation Needs to Continue

It is all very well to wear a bracelet asking the question, What would Jesus do? Of equal and probably greater importance is the question, What would Jesus say? While J.A.T. Robinson of Cambridge observed, “heaven in the Bible is nowhere the destination of the dying,”¹ most who claim to be following Jesus continue to speak constantly of “heaven” as the goal of faith. But they do not sound like Jesus. Do they therefore share his mind and purpose? Paul on the other hand declares that Christians have the “mind of Christ” which he equates in that passage in I Corinthians 2:6ff. with the *spirit* of God and of Jesus.

The Reformation positively did not disentangle the terrible muddle into which religion had fallen in regard to Jesus’ core concept: the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is the decisive issue for Jesus always. As George Ladd says: “Jesus divides society into two antithetical camps, those who have heard, understood and responded to Jesus’ Gospel of the Kingdom and those who have not.” The Kingdom is the organizing center of all Jesus taught. But it is a Kingdom which must be confessed and announced. With almost brutal urgency he tells the young man who is too preoccupied with family affairs: “You go out there and announce the Kingdom of God everywhere” (Luke 9:60). No wonder then that Matthew when speaking of the Gospel (the noun *evangellion*) qualifies it three times with the summary phrase “about the Kingdom” (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14). This fundamental fact about the Gospel has been all but swallowed up in current “Gospel” literature where every possible descriptive title is given to the “Gospel” except “Gospel of the Kingdom.” So far, then, is modern evangelicalism from the mind of Jesus.

What I did not learn in my Church of England experience comes clear when Scripture is allowed to stand as one story — God’s story — His “Israel story” allowing the Gentiles also to become part of that Israel story. The story contains His Program and Promises. I see now that the Bible is a single story and not just a collection of stories. And the glue that holds the whole beautiful account together is the Abrahamic covenant and the Davidic Covenant climaxing in the Jesuanic Kingdom covenant (Luke 22:28-30). What an excellent model Matthew set for us when he introduced the NT with the “genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David and son of Abraham.”

I see now also that the God of Israel was and is the God of the Messiah Jesus and of the NT writers — that God is the single Personal being, Yahweh or Adonai, who repeatedly proclaims His uniqueness and superiority over every other being in the universe and indeed over His own created Son, the Messiah. He is the God *of* our Lord Jesus Christ, which should, I suppose, prove to every reader of Scripture that the Father and Son cannot be co-equal Persons.

¹ *In the End God*, p. 104.

The Abrahamic faith has enabled me to understand that the whole point of the Messiah is that he is a man, the second Adam, the head of the new human creation, certainly not an angel visitor and much less actually God Himself. (He is of course as Son of God a perfect image of God his Father.) Matthew 1:20, Luke 1:35 speak of the creating and begetting of the Son of God in Mary's womb (note the tendency of translations to veil this fact by giving us "that which is *conceived*," instead of "that which is *begotten*"). It is to ruin that sublime story, if one maintains that in fact a preexisting being reduced himself to a fetus (nevertheless an all-powerful one possessing full Deity), entered the womb from outside, and emerged as a personage fully God and fully man. This would not be the conception/begetting/coming into existence of a brand new individual at all. It would be the metamorphosis of an angel or god. It is in fact a direct contradiction of Matthew and Luke. The two models, the later Trinitarian doctrine of Incarnation and the biblical account of the Son's conception/begetting, are mutually exclusive. Somewhat alarming is the fact that the Gnostic Valentinus as well as the church father Justin Martyr both speak of the Son coming through (*dia*) his mother, rather than coming *from* her (Matt. 1:16) and originating *in* her (1:20). The departure from the Bible on the crucial issue of Jesus' identity sowed the seeds of the interminable wrangles over the Trinity and Incarnation which followed. We dare not remain silent on this issue.

. Since the time of the credal councils, Matthew's and Luke's clear accounts of the origin of the Son of God have been suppressed. This I think testifies to the massive power of religion to deceive — rather as 1 billion Roman Catholics have been convinced that celibacy is the required state of the clergy, when Paul said that marriage would be perfectly normal for the elder/pastor/bishop. And rather as a billion Muslims can be induced to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, virginally conceived but who did not die on the cross (Judas died in his place).

The Abrahamic faith has in addition helped me to understand that the fatal mistake of much popular theology is to suppose that one can believe in Jesus *apart from his teachings* — that the Messenger can be accepted without his own Gospel message. It is important in this regard to think of the "faith of Jesus" not just faith in Jesus, which too easily dissolves into a much vaguer conception of our relationship to the Messiah. I am struck with the tremendous emphasis in the NT of the danger of *claiming* to be following Jesus without having grasped his words/Gospel and without the vital element of obedience. "Whoever will not *receive the Kingdom of God* as a little child will not enter it" (Luke 18:17). And for Luke "receiving the Kingdom of God" means hearing, understanding and living out of the Gospel of the Kingdom (the *logos*, word) which is God's intelligent discourse to the human race, via his agent Jesus, graciously offering us the opportunity of immortality.

The NT requires of us, then, belief in the words of Jesus and the Apostles and a corresponding life of love and faith (belief) based on the hope of the Kingdom (Col. 1:4, 5). The *opening* command of Jesus is located in Mark 1:14, 15 — Repent and believe the Gospel — not in Romans which is an expansion of and commentary on Jesus' Gospel.

Our Christian responsibility requires that these insights be communicated to others who do not have them, this being among Jesus' first exhortations to us: "I will make you fishers of men." Those caught by Jesus are expected to go out and fish for others. And fishing is a highly skilled activity needing patience and much training. Fruit is born when the seed of immortality sown in us via the Kingdom Message (Matt. 13:19) makes us

vehicles of the Gospel Message and when, like Jesus, we become coworkers with God in the propagation of and creation of new members of the royal family, whom Jesus called the Sons of the Kingdom. By receiving the precious seed of the Kingdom message (Matt. 13:19), the Logos, we become seeds and are supposed to propagate and bear fruit by reproduction. Jesus redefined the family as those who have accepted his Gospel Message, and as the head of that family created by the New Birth via the seed Message of the Kingdom, Jesus so to speak reproduces himself in others by imparting his mind/Gospel to them.

If these premises are right, the intelligent believer will want to know: Why was not all this made clear to me from early childhood and church attendance? For certainly in my case it was not. The creed, recited Sunday by Sunday, told me that I had to believe in Jesus Christ as born of the Virgin Mary, and suffering under Pontius Pilate, dead, buried and risen. It added that he was coming again as judge of living and dead. What the creed hustled over was the Gospel mission of Jesus. It seemed he had come to die and that was mainly it. Billy Graham in a more popular form has announced for years that “Jesus came to do three days work, to die, be buried and rise again.” Or otherwise put, that half the Gospel is that Jesus died and the other half that he rose. On this scheme the 3-year Jesus is reduced to a 3-day Jesus.

I believe that those two halves — death and resurrection — amount only to half the Gospel. The Kingdom of God as the first element commanding our belief has been left out. This tendency comes from the Reformation, which therefore I think must be reformed.

How Was the Gospel as Jesus Preached it Eclipsed?

The Roman Catholic Church for a thousand years before the Reformation had skillfully identified itself with the Kingdom of God! This move was a master stroke. It was its means to power for itself. Popes were kings and exercised jurisdiction over national governments. Bishops even in the Church of England are “enthroned.” They had become kings in the absence of the real King, Jesus, who is now waiting until the time comes for the restoration of the true Kingdom and of all things spoken of by the prophets (Acts 1:6; 3:21). Did no one notice that identifying the Kingdom with the Church was the very tendency against which Paul warned in I Corinthians 4:8ff: “You think that you are kings already. You are not. Would to God the Kingdom had arrived and we were ruling with the Messiah, but we are not: we apostles are treated as the scum of the earth.” That tendency prevailed, causing untold confusion about what the Kingdom of God, and thus the Gospel of the Kingdom, is. The Kingdom Gospel was distorted beyond recognition. The age to come of the future Kingdom was replaced by the “Kingdom now” and “heaven for souls at death.”

As Martin Werner observed Christianity underwent a radical shift. Starting as a movement anticipating the Kingdom of God it became the “Hellenistic mystery-religion of early Catholicism” (*The Formation of Dogma*, p. vii). It merged, in other words, with its pagan background. Werner went on to say that the new dogma of the divinity of Jesus was a substitute for the original concept of the Messiah. “This was wholly invalid and a myth behind which the historical Jesus completely disappeared” (p. 298).

How strikingly this awful turn of events in the history of Christianity was expressed by Jurgen Moltmann (*The Spirit of Life*, p. 89):

“In the degree to which Christianity cut itself off from its Hebrew roots and acquired a Hellenistic and Roman form, it lost its eschatological hope and surrendered its apocalyptic alternative to ‘this world’ of violence and death. It merged into late antiquity’s Gnostic religion of redemption. From Justin Martyr onwards [mid- 2nd century] most of the fathers revered Plato as a ‘Christian before Christ’ and extolled his feeling for the divine transcendence and for the values of the spiritual world. God’s eternity [including the new doctrine of the eternal Son] now took the place of God’s future, heaven replaced the coming Kingdom...the immortality of the soul displaced the resurrection of the body” (p. 89).

Was the Reformation able to reverse this disastrous development? The original cry for repentance in view of the Kingdom of God, so brilliantly clear in Matthew, Mark and Luke, was not restored to the church.

Both Luther and Calvin are very selective in their choice of biblical texts and at some passages they are harshly critical of the Apostles — Jesus’ beloved students. When Luke, one of the greatest and most passionate of all Gospel of the Kingdom advocates, penned the famous last question of the Apostles he reported the Apostles and others’ question in Acts 1:6 as follows (you will remember that the Apostles had just undergone a six-week seminar delivered by the immortalized risen Messiah on the Kingdom, Acts 1:3): “Lord, has the time now actually come for you to restore national sovereignty to Israel?” This question arose of course naturally and easily from all the good instruction they had received from Jesus. It was the *right* question. It was the “How long, O Lord,” question of all the faithful of all the ages. It is our question. But Calvin writes in his commentary: “There are more errors in that question than there are words...It is as if they have understood nothing.” The error, I fear, belongs in fact to the misunderstanding of the Gospel of the Kingdom on the part of Calvin. Calvin even ventured to suggest a different order for Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, making *John* the ideal introduction to his three fellow reporters of the life of Jesus:

“The doctrine which points out to us the power and the benefit of the coming of Christ, is far more clearly exhibited by John than by the [synoptists]. The three former [synoptic Gospels] exhibit [Christ’s] body...but John exhibits his soul. On this account I am accustomed to say that this Gospel [John] is a key to open the door for understanding the rest...In reading [the four Gospels] a different order would be advantageous, which is, that when we wish to read in Matthew and others that Christ was given to us by the Father, we should *first* learn from John the purpose for which he was manifested.”²

Note the similar tendency in Luther. Writing the preface to his translation of the New Testament (1522), he states: “John’s Gospel is the only Gospel which is delicately sensitive to what is the essence of the Gospel, and is *to be widely preferred to the other three* and placed on a higher level.”³

As G.F. Moore observed:

“Luther created by a dogmatic criterion a canon of the gospel within the canon of the books [he chose some books and ignored others]. Luther wrote: ‘Those Apostles who treat oftenest and highest of how faith alone justifies, are the best Evangelists. Therefore St. Paul’s Epistles are more a Gospel than Matthew, Mark

² Foreword to Calvin’s commentary on John.

³ Cited by D. Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980, p. 160.

and Luke. For these do not set down much more than the works and miracles of Christ; but the grace which we receive through Christ no one so boldly extols as St. Paul, especially in his letter to *the Romans*.’ In comparison with the Gospel of John, the Epistles of Paul, and I Peter, ‘which are the kernel and marrow of all books,’ the Epistle of James, with its insistence that man is not justified by faith alone, but by works proving faith, is ‘a mere letter of straw, for there is nothing evangelical about it.’ It is clear that the infallibility of Scripture has here, in fact if not in [Luther’s] admission, followed the infallibility of popes and councils; for the Scripture itself has to submit to be judged by the ultimate criterion of its accord with Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith.”⁴

Luther, in other words, replaced the papal dogma with another dogma. The Gospel for Luther is found first and foremost in Romans and Galatians and not in the words of Jesus. Luther’s difficulty with the Kingdom Gospel is reflected in his amazing dictum that “Christ is neither taught nor recognized in the book of Revelation...Even if it were a blessed thing to believe what is contained in the Book of Revelation, no man knows what that is.” A German commentator observed, “Luther could not thoroughly appreciate the doctrine of God’s Kingdom on earth which is exhibited in the Revelation and forms the proper center of everything contained in it” (H. Olshausen, *Comm. on the NT*, 1861, Vol. 1 Intro., p. cxv).

But the Kingdom is also the proper center of the saving Gospel, according to Jesus. Indeed it is the proper center of the whole of Scripture.

Back to the Intelligent Pew-Sitter’s Question

What has gone wrong? The answer has been provided, I am sure, by those learned scholars of the history of dogma who have demonstrated beyond any question that Paul’s fears about a departure from the faith (cp. Jude’s cry even in the first century for a return to “the faith once delivered to the saints”) were justified: “After my departure grievous wolves will enter...They will turn away their hearts from the truth and attach themselves to myths and fables” (Acts 20:29-31; II Tim. 4:3, 4).

That happened – demonstrably. Professor Loofs of Germany, a pupil of Harnack, one of the princes of church history, lectured in 1922 at Oberlin College in Ohio and remarked that none of his colleagues in Germany believed that the traditional Christology of Nicea and Chalcedon was biblically valid (we reprinted his statement in *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, Vol. 10, No. 3). It was this same Loofs who spoke of “polytheism having entered the church, camouflaged, in the second century.” Yes, a corrupting polytheism crept in under a mask. The need to provide a second “god” in the form of a Gnostic Aeon dealt a blow to the strict monotheism of Jesus’ own creed. Under the guise of promoting Jesus, the creeds actually undermined his humanity and at the same time threatened the unique status of the One God, his Father.

As Marian Hillar has shown,⁵ the influx of Greek philosophical ideas about how the cosmos is run required that believers take on board the idea of a preexisting mediator Son

⁴Moore, *History of Religions*, Scribners, 1920, p. 320.

⁵He plans to trace further the transition of early Christianity to its later “orthodox” form in a forthcoming book. Meanwhile his *Michael Servetus: Intellectual Giant, Humanist and Martyr* (University Press of America) is valuable reading in addition to his earlier treatise, *The Case Against Servetus: The Turning Point in the Struggle for Freedom of Conscience*.

of God, a bridge between heaven and earth. Greeks believed that the One supreme God was removed at a great distance from His human creation. What was needed was a series of Aeons, supernatural beings, or in some systems a single Aeon to close the gap between heaven and earth. When they were introduced to Christianity, it seemed reasonable to Greeks that Jesus of Nazareth was just the candidate needed to fill the cosmological gap, linking God to man. Religious figures are typically idealized and divinized by their devotees. Let's suppose, so ran the story, that the Son of God was really begotten, brought into existence *not* in the womb of his mother Mary (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:35) but actually in heaven in ages past. How dramatic and exciting would be such a theogony. Greek gods were known to have offspring. Cosmogony of this type was about as reasonable and appealing in the first century as evolution today seems to be for so many. How compelling then would be the idea that this amazing Son of God surrendered an ages-long existence as an angel and engineered, under the name of the Holy Spirit, his own transmutation into a fetus, placing himself into the womb of his mother and being born *through* her.

On that fatal step the whole of the Trinitarian controversy, which raged until the 5th century, and has never been resolved, was based. Loofs (1858-1928) puts it so excellently. His words have been translated from the German by several and this is my version. He documents how the Church, from the second century AD, lost sight of the historical Jesus and replaced him with a spirit-being who took on human flesh, but was not really a human being! He shows how the unity of God, the first and most important of all commandments (Mark 12:28ff.), was permanently damaged because of the speculative Greek philosophical influence which invaded the original church. A weakening process began when the poison of Greek philosophy mounted a kind of terrorist attack on the supreme unity of the One God of the Bible.

“The Apologists [‘church fathers’ like Justin Martyr, mid-2nd century] laid the foundation for the perversion/corruption (*Verkehrung*) of Christianity into a revealed [philosophical] teaching. Specifically, their Christology affected the later development disastrously. By taking for granted the transfer of the concept of **Son of God onto the preexisting Christ**, they were the cause of the Christological problem of the 4th century. They caused a **shift** in the point of departure of Christological thinking — *away from the historical Christ* and onto the issue of preexistence. They thus **shifted** attention away from the **historical life of Jesus**, putting it into the shadow and promoting instead the Incarnation. They tied Christology to cosmology and could not tie it to soteriology. The Logos teaching is not a ‘higher’ Christology than the customary one. It lags in fact far behind the genuine appreciation of Christ. According to their teaching it is no longer God who reveals Himself in Christ, but the Logos, the inferior God, a God who as God is subordinated to the Highest God (inferiorism or subordinationism). In addition, the suppression of economic-trinitarian ideas by metaphysical-pluralistic concepts of the divine triad (*trias*) can be traced to the Apologists” (Friedrich Loofs, *Leitfaden zum Studium des Dogmengeschichte* [Manual for the Study of the History of Dogma], 1890, part 1, ch. 2, sec. 18: “Christianity as a Revealed Philosophy. The Greek Apologists,” Niemeyer Verlag, 1951, p. 97).⁶

⁶ The translation is mine.

This disastrous development is reflected exactly in modern popular evangelism. James Kennedy says:

“Many people today think that the essence of Christianity is Jesus’ teaching, but that is not so...Christianity centers not in the teachings of Jesus, but in the person of Jesus as Incarnate God who came into the world to take upon Himself our guilt and die in our place” (“How I Know Jesus is God,” *Truths that Transform*, Nov. 11th, 1989).⁷

Harnack summed up the results of that second-century shift away from the biblical Gospel and faith: “Thus was created the future dogmatic in the form which still prevails in the churches and which presupposes the Platonic and Stoic conception of the world long overthrown by science. The attempt made at the beginning of the Reformation to free the Christian faith from this amalgamation remained at first without success.”

The warnings provided by these two giants of church history have been repeated in our time by Karl-Josef Kuschel in his monumental *Born Before All Time? The Dispute over Christ’s Origin* (with foreword by Hans Kung, 1990, Eng. trans. New York: Crossroad, 1992). For details see appendix to this paper.

Recovering the Gospel

Despite the fact that the Gospel is directly connected to the term Kingdom, as “the Good News of the Kingdom of God,” in some twenty places in Matthew, Mark and Luke, as well as by implication in scores of verses throughout the New Testament where the word “Gospel” or “Message” (“word,” word of God”) appears, modern invitations to salvation fail to give us the phrase “Gospel of the Kingdom.” This extraordinary silence about the Kingdom of God is characteristic of so much that is known as Christian evangelism.

Christians should awake to the fact that their various traditional systems, claiming to be based on Scripture, have not served them well. Scripture nowhere says that John’s Gospel is to be preferred over Matthew, Mark and Luke. Nor does it teach that Jesus preached a Jewish Message up to the cross; whereupon Paul then took a Message of grace to the Gentiles. The New Scofield Bible, read by millions, follows the dogmatic suppression of Matthew, Mark and Luke as documents presenting the saving Gospel. It says that a “strong legal and Jewish coloring is to be expected up to the cross.”⁸

We are at the crux of the problem which seems to have afflicted the Gospel of Jesus. A false distinction and division is being created by the so-called “dispensationalist” school. The teachings of Jesus do not remain at the center of the scheme of salvation proposed by dispensationalists.⁹ John Walvoord says that the Sermon on the Mount:

⁷ Sanday commented rather weakly, attempting to justify this post-biblical decline into pagan philosophy: “The facts [Loofs, above] are capable of being stated in this way; and it is perhaps right that they should be so stated...And yet...Sooner or later, it was inevitable that Christianity should be brought into relation with the contemporary philosophy...Was it not a noble thought on the part of Justin which led him to see ‘seeds’ of the Divine Logos at work in Gentile thinkers of old, in men like Heraclitus and Socrates or Plato or Pythagoras, while the divine Word as a whole was incarnate in Christ?” (pp. 17, 18).

⁸ *New Scofield Bible*, p. 987. The fact is that the whole New Testament faith is Jewish in character and consistently makes strong demands for obedience.

⁹ The problem is even more acute in the case of ultra-dispensationalism which finds three versions of the Gospel in the NT.

“treats not of salvation, but of the character and conduct of those who belong to Christ...That it is suitable to point an unbeliever to salvation in Christ is plainly not the intention of this message...The Sermon on the Mount, as a whole, is not church truth precisely...It is not intended to delineate justification by faith or the gospel of salvation.”¹⁰

Rather ambiguously he adds that it should not be relegated to “unimportant truth.”¹¹

The words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount could hardly express more clearly that obedience to his teachings are in fact the basis of salvation: “Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven [i.e., be saved]” (Matt. 5:20). “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven but he who does the will of My Father...” (Matt. 7:21). Jesus goes on to say that those who fail to gain salvation are those who fail to obey his words (Matt. 7:24-27).¹² And this is, in the words of Walvoord, “not church truth precisely”?

Until churches renounce the disparagement of the teaching of Jesus implied in their various systems, we cannot hope for unity. Surely we must rally around the great central theme of the Gospel of the Kingdom, which expresses the genius of the Christian faith and brings us close to the heart of Jesus. L.S. Chafer’s distinction drawn between what some label the “legal” teachings of Jesus and the grace Message of Paul seems to us to be entirely mistaken:

“Under the conditions laid down in the kingdom teachings, life is entered into by a personal faithfulness (Matt. 5:28-29; 18:8)...[Luke 13:24] opens with the words, ‘Strive to enter in at the narrow gate.’ The word *strive* is a translation of *agonidzomai*, which means ‘agonize.’ It suggests the uttermost expenditure of the athlete’s strength in the contest. Such is the human condition that characterizes all the kingdom passages which offer entrance into life. [But] an abrupt change is met after turning to the Gospel of John, which was written to announce the new message of grace, which is, that eternal life may be had through believing. No two words of Scripture more vividly express the great characterizing relationship in law and grace than agonize and believe. Grace is the unfolding of the fact that One has agonized in our stead, and life is ‘through His Name,’ not by any degree of human faithfulness and merit.”¹³

While dispensationalism upholds the authority and integrity of Scripture it proceeds to divide Jesus from John and Paul, making the latter rivals of Jesus. It makes the Kingdom Gospel of Jesus, by which salvation is to be sought,¹⁴ of historical interest only, since the Message was changed, according to the theory, at the cross. It is simply not true that believing is a new idea in the Gospel of John and in Paul. Believing the Gospel of the Kingdom of God is the platform of Jesus’ presentation of the saving Message in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (John refers constantly to the “Word” and “words” of Jesus), and Paul likewise traces all sound faith to belief in the “Message of Messiah” (Rom. 10:17). (Jesus is the original campaigner for the theocratic party.)

¹⁰ *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come*, Moody Press, 1984, pp. 44, 45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹² Cp. John 3:36; 8:51; 12:44-50.

¹³ *Systematic Theology*, Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-48, Vol. IV, p. 224.

¹⁴ Mark 1:14, 15; Matt. 13:19; Luke 8:12; Acts 8:12; 19:8; 28:23, 31.

C.S. Lewis reflects the same tendency to hide the Gospel of Jesus. **He does not seem to think that Jesus preached the Gospel:**

“The epistles are for the most part the earliest Christian documents we possess. The Gospels came later [but Jesus preached the Gospel long before the epistles were written]. *They are not ‘the Gospel,’ the statement of the Christian belief...* [so Christ’s words are not the statement of Christianity?]. In that sense *the epistles are more primitive and more central than the Gospels* — though not of course than the great events which the Gospels recount [what about the great words/teachings of Jesus which are the saving Gospel?]. God’s Act (the Incarnation, the crucifixion, and the Resurrection) [what about the preaching of the Gospel by Jesus?] comes first: the earliest theological analysis of it comes in the epistles: then when the generation which had heard the Lord was dying out, the Gospels were composed to provide the believers a record of the great Act and of some of the Lord’s sayings” (Matthew, Mark and Luke in fact record *the Gospel*, as does John).¹⁵

What about Jesus’ saving gospel of the Kingdom? Luther and C.S. Lewis rather skillfully bypass the gospel according to Jesus.

Christians should awake to the fact that their various traditional systems, claiming to be based on Scripture, have not served them well. Scripture nowhere says that John’s Gospel is to be preferred over Matthew, Mark and Luke. Nor does it teach that Jesus preached a Jewish Message up to the cross; whereupon Paul then took a different Message of grace to the Gentiles.

Acts 20:24, 25 provide a great key to furthering the Reformation. Paul there equates the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom with the Gospel of grace. In so doing Paul has followed the Master Rabbi perfectly. Jesus preached the grace of God as he preached the Kingdom. The parable of the sower describes the heart and core of Jesus’ salvation formula, the key to immortality. That parable is the equivalent of the “born again” teaching of John’s account. The sower sows the word about the Kingdom of God (Matt. 13:19). Human response to that Gospel of the Kingdom is the critical issue in human destiny. But many are blind and deaf when exposed to this Gospel as Jesus preached it. “If they understood the word/Gospel they would repent and be forgiven” (see Mark 4:11, 12). Jesus here plainly makes an intelligent, wholehearted reception of his Gospel preaching of the Kingdom the condition of repentance and forgiveness. Luke (8:12), presenting the same teaching, makes the same point even more starkly. “When anyone hears the word, the Devil comes and tries to snatch away the word sown in his heart, so that he cannot believe it and be saved” (i.e. so that he cannot repent and be forgiven). No wonder then that in the book of Acts (also 8:12) the salvation process is initiated when “they believed Philip preaching to them the Gospel about the Kingdom and the name of Jesus.” Once again, faith means believing the words of Jesus or his agents, about the Kingdom. Paul argued the Kingdom of God and the things of Jesus (Acts 19:8; 28:23, 31), discussing these issues for lengthy periods of time using the Hebrew Bible.

The Messiah had declared the point of Christianity and reason for his whole mission with these extraordinary words: “I must preach the Gospel of the Kingdom of God to the other cities also: that is what I was sent to do” (Luke 4:43). This brilliant definition of the Christian faith is seldom if ever found in any tract or Gospel presentation, except in the

¹⁵Introduction to J. B. Phillips, *Letters to Young Churches*, Fontana Books, pp. 9, 10.

literature of the Abrahamic faith, where it is featured very frequently. The preaching of the Kingdom (Luke 16:16) is to the Kingdom itself as sowing is to harvest; as orientation is to graduation; as the wedding preparation is to the wedding day; as the invitation to the banquet is to the banquet itself. The *preaching* of the Kingdom is to the Kingdom itself as the starting gun is to the gold medal, as the *promise* of an inheritance is to the inheritance actually acquired. Salvation, in other words, is a process initiated now under the stimulus of the Gospel, continued through trial and tribulation and fully realized in the Kingdom which is to come. To muddle these categories threatens to confuse the NT Message.

The notion of “once saved always saved” implies that the race is won when the starting gun is fired or that the baby is born when conception takes place or that graduation certificates are handed out on orientation day.¹⁶ When students sometimes ask, “What good is a Gospel about the future? What about the present?” they are not thinking like the New Testament which presents the journey towards salvation as a process in which the end is inextricably linked to the beginning. In vain some try to diminish the element of the future Kingdom in the Gospel by making the Kingdom a synonym for the present activity of the spirit in the heart. But the coming of the spirit of God is expressly not the same event as the coming of the Kingdom (Acts 1:5-7). We are saved “in hope” (Rom. 8:24) of being saved. We are indeed currently “being saved” (I Cor. 1:18) and most often in the NT we are going to be saved when Jesus comes bringing the longed-for Kingdom. “Salvation is now closer to us than when we first believed” (Rom. 13:11). But that is not the way the public has been taught to think of it.

As Anabaptists we must press forward, empowered by the current amazing tools of communication and rapid conversation across the world. Our cause is the restoration, preservation and propagation of the wonderful truths of the Gospel of Jesus, which contains the meaning of life and the formula for immortality.

¹⁶ For an excellent account of salvation as a process, see Robert Shank, *Life in the Son*.

Appendix to “Reforming the Reformation”

The warnings provided by two giants of church history, Harnack and Loofs, have been repeated in our time by Karl-Josef Kuschel in his monumental *Born Before All Time? The Dispute over Christ's Origin* (with foreword by Hans Kung, 1990, Eng. trans. New York: Crossroad, 1992). Their findings help us to orientate ourselves in the present religious scene and understand why it is we object to so much of popular theology. The facts are that the faith of the NT did not remain in tact. It was drastically altered beginning in the early second century. The cause and effects are transparently clear to the historian of dogmas and church history. They remain largely hidden from churchgoers, who assume a legitimate development from the Bible through the creeds and into the modern Church. These historians, however, warn that there was no such smooth development, but rather a falling away from Apostolic teaching under the baneful effects of Greek, pagan philosophy.

Kuschel says:

“From the second century...*after* the New Testament period — in the time of the Apostolic Fathers and the early Christian Apologists, *the spiritual climate changed completely*...a fixation and gradual Hellenization of Christianity as a doctrine set in. This, too, is decisive for Harnack, and continues to shape his further work: from the second century on, a **dangerous Hellenization** took place in Christianity...thus delivering Christianity over to philosophical, cosmological and speculative systems of thought... [the earliest fathers promoted] the view that Jesus is the supreme heavenly spiritual being alongside God, who appeared on earth, lived a human life and after the completion of his work returned¹⁷ to heaven. Justin in particular indicates that ‘a Christianity without belief in the preexistence of Christ was really inconceivable.’.... What was the consequence of such ‘spiritual Christology’? Jesus Christ was now increasingly torn from his Jewish-Old Testament roots and ‘transplanted to Hellenistic, cosmological soil.’ According to Harnack [such a view implies that] ‘the preexistence does not refer to Jesus whole appearance, but only to a part of his essence; it does not primarily serve to glorify the wisdom and power of God... but glorifies Christ *and thereby threatens the monarchy [unity] of God.*’ And what was the consequence of this? ‘The appearance of Christ is now an ‘assumption of flesh,’ and immediately the intricate questions about the connection of the heavenly and spiritual being with the flesh simultaneously arise and are at first settled by the theories of a naïve docetism [I.e., Christ only *seems to be* a human being but really is not!]. Thus the Christian religion was mixed up with the refined asceticism of a perishing civilization, and a foreign substructure given to its system of morality... [leading to enforced celibacy and thus monasticism].

[It is clear that Paul was contradicted in this process by which Jesus was turned into the Son of God preexisting. This new theory meant that the spiritual Son of God preceded Adam. Paul however insists on the reverse order: ‘The first man Adam was made a living person; the last Adam was made a life-imparting spirit. The spiritual was not first, the natural man was; and afterwards came the spiritual man.’ (See I Cor 15:45- 46)]

¹⁷ Note how the NIV continues to pervert the Greek text by making Jesus say that he was “returning” to God, when Jesus actually said he was “going,” or “ascending” to God. See NIV Jon 13:3; 16:28; 20:17.

“Thus it was clear to Harnack that from the second century Christianity saw itself drawn into a ‘declining’ culture and utterly alienated from its origin. Especially with the Apologists, this led to Christianity becoming intellectual and doctrinal. And Harnack made clear with a quotation from his colleague Friedrich Loofs, the historian of dogma, how much the original accents had shifted in matters of Christology, indeed to what degree such a Hellenistic Christology had developed into a threat to the original Jewish image of God: ‘Taking for granted the transference of the concept of Son to the pre-existent Christ, the Apologists [Justin Martyr and others] made possible the rise of the Christological problem [causing centuries of argument and in-fighting]; they shifted the point of Christological thought from the historical Christ back into preexistence and overshadowed the life of Jesus with the Incarnation; they associated Christology with cosmology, but they could not connect it with soteriology.’”

“So that was Harnack’s decisive point: if we look at the development of Christology, at how the one who proclaimed the Kingdom of God became a kind of heavenly being; how the intimate, mysterious personal relationship between Jesus of Nazareth and God became *a theory about his divine and human natures*; how the simple Gospel came to be dissolved in a philosophical theory; how the monarchy [unity] of God was now threatened by the appearance of an independent heavenly Christ alongside God, we can tell the history of this Christology only as a history of loss: ***an apostasy from its origins***, as a displacing of the historical Jesus by the pre-existent Christ; as an intellectualist, speculative, cosmological alienation from the original proclamation of Jesus... [Harnack said]: ‘The problem of determining the significance of Christ through a speculation concerning his natures, and of associating with these the concrete features of the historical Christ, was originated in Hellenism.’ [Kuschel urges us to see] how untenable the idea of preexistence is... [and that we should] unmask it and refute it as Christians. Such conceptions of preexistence are to be rejected as contrary to the Bible, out of keeping with Jesus, and contrary to reason. What more was there to say?”

“[Harnack had recognized that] “for Judaism the decisive notion was that God is not surprised by history but always is and remains the Lord of history: everything that takes place in history has already been ‘in God,’ in God’s plan beforehand; it has been ‘before God’s eyes,’ before emerging from concealment in heaven into public view on earth without loss of substance (the earliest idea is that Moses fashions the tabernacle after a heavenly model: Exod. 25:9, 40; 26:30; 27:8; Num 8:4)... The earliest Jewish idea [is] of a preexistence in the thought of God, which for Harnack was preserved in its purest form in I Pet. 1:20: ‘Christ was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake.’”

Kuschel goes on to summarize Harnack’s findings:

“But **from the second century on...** Christ increasingly became a being who had been ‘first spirit’ before he assumed flesh (**II Clem, 9:5**). In addition, there had been Jewish Messialogy with its view that the Messiah had been **chosen** before the creation and therefore was the beginning of all creation. Harnack sees this as the [fatal] springboard for the whole of the later development of both Christological and Trinitarian theology. His conclusion is important enough to be quoted in full:

“Christ saved us, being first of all spirit and origin of all creation, took flesh and in this way called us” (II Clem 9:5). **That is the fundamental, theological and philosophical creed on which the whole Trinitarian and Christological speculations**

of the church of the succeeding centuries was built, and it is thus the root of the orthodox system of dogmatics; for the notion that Christ was the “origin of all creation” necessarily led in some measure to the conception of Christ [preexisting as the Logos/**Son**]. For the Logos had long been regarded by cultured men as the beginning and principle of creation.”

“In short the categories of Harnack’s criticism of preexistence in the history of Christological dogma are shift, transference, suppression, overpainting [i.e., the biblical story of Jesus ruined and obscured by painting another Jesus-story on top of it]. Certainly he did not see a threat to the ‘simplicity of the Gospel’ and beyond that to the uniqueness an sole rule of God [the unity of God] *in the New Testament, but in the subsequent ‘Hellenization,’* not to say doctrinalization...He was confident that what he regarded as original Christianity could also be commended to the people of his time, and conversely that whatever could not be commended to the people of his time (intellectualist speculation) did not correspond with original Christianity. This was the historian’s verdict. Historical research had provided urgently necessary enlightenment and critical analysis in the service of faith. What more was there to say?”

“[Harnack made clear that] in the ‘Apostles creed’ ‘only-begotten Son is still understood in an utterly unmetaphysical, unspeculative way.’ [As Matt. 1:20 and Luke 1:35 understand it]. Only ‘**in the period after the Nicene Creed** (325 AD, in the middle of the fourth century, was this statement interpreted of ‘**an eternal Sonship of Christ.**’) Around the middle of the second century, when the Apostles’ Creed was composed, for its author, ‘only begotten Son’ had simply meant the ‘historical Christ and his earthly appearing.’ Here too Harnack makes use of the same argument as in the *History of Dogma*: ‘It was the first speculative Christian Apologists and **Gnostic theologians** who understood the word in a different way and found expressed in it the relationship of the pre-historical Christ to God. Later the whole doctrine of two natures was read into these words: ‘the only-begotten Son’ then meant the divine nature and the human nature was confessed only in what follows. But it took a long time for this interpretation to become established in the church, then to become universal and to *suppress* the earlier [biblical] one. So anyone who reads the “eternal Sonship” into the Roman creed [Apostles’ Creed] is giving it a different sense from the one that it originally had. Nevertheless, after the third century anyone who at that time still kept to the **original sense of the creed** and refused to acknowledge the new [Trinitarian] interpretation was branded a heretic.” (Kuschel, *Born Before All Time?* pp. 43-51).

[Thus “orthodoxy” and “heresy” swapped places.
And so the situation has remained largely until today!]

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