

A leading evangelism expert, Dr. Mortimer Arias (*Announcing the Reign of God*, Fortress Press, 1984), observed: “We seem to be faced with what can be called an eclipse of the Kingdom of God lasting from the apostolic age to the present, particularly in our theology of evangelization.” He adds: “The Kingdom of God is God’s own dream, His project for the world and for humanity! He makes us dreamers and He wants us to be seduced by His dream and to dream with Him...It is not we who dream but God who dreams in us.”

Arias admitted: “When I left the seminary I had no clear idea of the Kingdom of God and I had no place in my theology for the second coming, the Parousia...I had no concerns about the future. Thousands of books are printed and circulated every year on evangelization; most of these fall into the category of ‘how to’ manuals for churches (devising plans, strategies, methodologies and goals)...our traditional mini-theologies (the ‘plan of salvation’ or ‘four spiritual laws’) *do not do justice to the whole Gospel*. Not all this activity or activism is a sign of health or creativity...The Good News of the Kingdom *is not the usual way we describe the gospel and evangelization*...**The Kingdom of God has practically disappeared from evangelistic preaching and has been ignored by traditional ‘evangelism.’** The evangelistic message has been centered in personal salvation, individual conversion, and incorporation into the church. The Kingdom of God as a parameter or perspective or as content of the proclamation has been *virtually absent*...Those interested in evangelization have not yet been interested in the Kingdom theme...Why not try Jesus’ own definition of his Mission — and ours? For Jesus evangelization was no more and no less than announcing the Kingdom of God” (emphasis added).

The Abrahamic Faith: Taking Courage from the Words of Modern Scholars

13th Theological Conference

Anthony Buzzard, April 24, 2004

“Salvation is not for the well meaning but for the desperate.” (James Denny)

My purpose this evening is to bring encouragement to this particular group of (sometimes beleaguered) “Anabaptists” by pointing to the powerful support offered us by distinguished writers on the Bible and Christian history. It is enormously strengthening to dig into the history of ideas to give greater substance to one’s teaching and convictions.

Since our arrival at Oregon, now Atlanta Bible College, I have been trying to understand why the excellent sense which it seems to me the Abrahamic faith makes of the Bible, does not seem to be easily available “out there” in the variegated, denominational church world. Biblical understanding seemed to be in very short supply in Britain where I grew up in the C of E, and currently only about 5% of the citizens go to church other than to be “hatched, matched and dispatched.”

We seemed in the UK always to become *persona non grata* if we mentioned our belief in Conditional Immortality (“sleep of the dead” and annihilation as opposed to eternal torment) or that it is misleading to say that “Jesus is God.” What I have found is that some of the most recognized writers, of the past 200 years especially, and distinguished experts in our time, strongly confirm our premillennial understanding of the Kingdom to be established on this planet at the Parousia (notably Henry Alford with his classic plea for a premill. reading of Rev. 20), and our insistence on the Gospel of the Kingdom of God being the essential foundation of the saving Gospel as Jesus and Paul preached it. Gary Burge in *NIV Application Commentary (Revisoning Evangelical Theology)* writes: “Stanley Grenz has reviewed the failed attempts of evangelical theology to fire the imagination of the modern world. He argues for the Kingdom of God as the new organizing center of what we say and do.”

This denomination, the Church of God (Abrahamic Faith), was founded in the 1830s on that conviction (cp. Luke 4:43; Acts 8:12, etc.) — that the fundamental element in the Christian Gospel is the *Gospel about the Kingdom* as Jesus preached it. Some 30 chapters in the synoptics define the saving Gospel as centered in the Kingdom of God, without so much as a word (at that stage) of Jesus’ death and resurrection. How can it be truthfully said — as we hear so often — that the Christian Gospel is *only* about the death and resurrection of Jesus? Why not a return to the parable of the sower as the key to Jesus’ theology of evangelism, rather than isolated verses from Romans 10, and the “four spiritual laws”?

Help from Well-Known Scholars

We should not forget that the Church of England officially abolished “eternal hellfire” in their doctrinal commission statement of 1996.¹ (Tom Wright was part of that committee. More about him later.) What they put in its place was less impressive. It has led, as Tom Wright now says, to a vague universalism with everyone “going to heaven.”

One of the most exciting events for me in these past 22 years with the Abrahamic community and the Bible college was the discovery of Dr. Brown’s article on Christology in the journal *Ex Auditu* (Vol. 7, 1991). Greg Demmitt had known of Dr. Brown when Greg was at Fuller. What I read in that precious article, as well as in Dr. Brown’s contribution to the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (the article on “Jesus Christ”) unleashed a new sense of excitement in me. Here was a leading systematician of our day telling us, and confirming for us, what our tradition has proposed

¹ *The Mystery of Salvation.*

since the Reformation (and of course this view is well represented too in the first 2 centuries) — namely that to be called Son of God in the Bible does not mean that you *are* God!

Before giving you excerpts from that article let me set the scene of the controversy over Christology which continues to be the one great fundamental issue in theology. I will do this by referring to a recognized master of church history, Adolph Harnack (1851-1930).

The Loss of the Messianic Jesus in the Early Struggles over Christology

From the early second century, or even earlier in the days of John, and calling forth John's impassioned plea to stay with Jesus Christ the "human, historical begotten Son" who came *en sarki* (I John 4:1-6; II John 7; I John 5:18, not KJV), "in the flesh," not "*into* the flesh" — as though John were a good proponent of the Incarnation of the eternal Son — the battle raged over the relationship of the Son to the Father. It was the famous Logos teaching of John 1:1 which provided a storm center for the various views. The great question was, how are we to understand the Logos which/who² was with God and "was God"?

In his *History of Dogma*, Adolf Harnack discusses early *opposition* to the emerging idea that John's Logos must denote the *preexistence* of a pre-Genesis, created Son of God and later "eternally begotten" Son of God — a member of the eternal Trinity. This opposition to developing Trinitarianism, Harnack says, "was called forth by interest in the evangelical, the Synoptic idea of Christ [the Christ described by Matthew, Mark and Luke]. With this was combined an attack on the use of Platonic philosophy in Christian doctrine"³ [Had not Paul alerted us to the subtle danger of philosophy?] "The first public and literary opponents of Christian Logos *speculations* did not escape criticism that they depreciated the dignity of the Savior." In other words those who did not think that speculating about a *preexisting, prehistoric* Son was valid were accused, as today, of saying that Jesus was "just a man" and somehow therefore inadequate to the task of being the Savior. What do we know of these early unitarians?

You will recognize here many of the themes of our own conference this year, nearly 2000 years later.

Harnack: "With the Monarchians [the unitarians] the first subject of interest was *the man* Jesus." They were doing their Christology in other words "from below," or "from behind," beginning with the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible, and not "from above," as though the Savior arrived from a pre-mundane existence in heaven — what later became the full-blown doctrine of the Incarnation.

Harnack really captures my attention when he muses as follows: "Did not the [developing] doctrine of the heavenly *aeon* who became incarnate in the Redeemer contain another remnant of the old Gnostic leaven?" [Paul warned us also against the insidious effects of "gnosis" falsely so-called, I Tim. 6:20.] "Did not the sending forth of the Logos (*probable* of the Logos) to create the world recall the [Gnostic ideas] of the emanation of the aeons? Was not ditheism [belief in two Gods] set up if *two* divine beings were to be worshiped? Not only were the uncultured Christian laity driven to such criticisms...but also all those theologians who refused to give any place to Platonic philosophy in Christian dogmatics?"⁴

Harnack maintained that not all theologians were happy with projecting the human Son of God back into pre-history. The whole process smacked too much of the Gnostic idea that the one unapproachable God must be mediated to us via a lesser intermediary, an Aeon.

² F.F. Bruce was kind enough to respond to a question I asked him about whether the Logos of John was really the Son preexisting. He replied with some uncertainty by speaking of "the Logos who (or which?)..." Bruce went on to say that he doubted if Paul believed in a second preexisting Person, but that John on balance probably did.

³ *History of Dogma*, Vol. 3, English translation by Neil Buchanan, p. 8.

⁴ p. 9.

And what was at stake in the struggle over the identity of Christ as Son of God in relation to the One God of Israel? What eventually happened when one of the competing parties established itself as the only “orthodox” faith? Harnack again: “For the great mass of the laity in the East the mystery of the person of Christ took the place of the Christ who was to have set up his visible Kingdom of glory upon earth.”⁵

So then, along with the struggle over *who Jesus was* went the companion struggle over the Gospel of the Kingdom. Christology and eschatology went hand in hand as subjects of the ongoing battle between what Bart Ehrman calls “proto-orthodoxy” and its rival — which was really an original view of Jesus which was finally denounced as heresy.

Bart Ehrman as a sort of contemporary Harnack on a smaller scale maintains that original Truth was eventually banished as heresy. The new “orthodox” then consolidated their victory over original truth by destroying the literature of their defeated opponents and centering authority in a single bishop over each church (later headquartering him with supreme power in Rome). Thus Ehrman in his fascinating recent book *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* writes of the second century: “In some regions of ancient Christendom, what later came to be labeled ‘heresy’ was in fact the earliest and principal form of Christianity. In other regions views later deemed heretical coexisted with the view that came to be embraced by the church as a whole...To this extent ‘orthodoxy,’ in the sense of a unified group advocating an apostolic doctrine accepted by the majority of Christians everywhere, simply did not exist in the second and third centuries.”⁶

Harnack describes what appears to be an alarming loss of the actual Jesus of history. At the heart of the disputes which fractured Christian unity was the matter of the *origin* of Jesus as Son of God. Was that origin in history or in prehistoric times? “The struggle was a strenuous effort of Stoic Platonism to obtain supremacy in the theology of the Church; the victory of Plato over Zeno and Aristotle in Christian science. The history of the *displacement of the historical Christ* by the *preexistent Christ, of the Christ of reality by the fictitious Christ*,⁷ in dogmatics; finally, as the victorious attempt to substitute the mystery of the person of Christ for the person himself, and by means of a theological formula unintelligible to the laity, to put the laity with their Christian faith under guardians...When the Logos Christology obtained a complete victory, the traditional view of the Supreme deity as one Person [i.e. an original unitarianism] and, along with this, every thought of the real and complete humanity of the Redeemer was in fact condemned as being intolerable in the Church. Its place was taken by the [impersonal, human] nature of Christ which without the person is simply a cipher. The defeated party had right on its side.”⁸

Harnack goes on to describe the history of that defeated party which “would not give up the personal, numerical unity of God” — i.e., second- and third-century unitarians like Paul of Samosata, Bishop of Antioch deposed for “heresy” in 268 AD, the Theodotians and Artemon. These were all labeled as heretics, beyond the pale of the true faith. And so it has remained until today. And thus the struggle seems to persist unresolved.

Professor William Sanday, once Professor of Divinity at Oxford, in his article on the Son of God in the *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible* tells us that there is no support at all in the Synoptic Gospels for a preexisting Son of God. Are there verses in John which would lead us to think that the Son predated his birth? Sanday says: “Perhaps there are not any.” Unintentionally he supported our “Socinian”⁹ view of Jesus as the uniquely begotten Son (Luke 1:35; Matt. 1:18, 20). James Dunn is surely more widely read than anyone on our subject. In his classic *Christology in the Making* he makes Luke the proponent

⁵ p. 9.

⁶ Oxford University Press, 2003, 173.

⁷ Translation of Hengel for this phrase.

⁸ Harnack, p. 10

⁹ It is interesting that the Abrahamic community do not support the Socinian understanding of the Atonement. We have always held to the evangelical understanding of substitution, that Jesus died in our place.

of a view which we find convincing: “In his birth narrative Luke is more specific than Matthew in his assertion of Jesus’ divine Sonship from birth (1:32, 35, cp. 2:49, “my Father’s house”). Here again it is sufficiently clear that a virginal conception by divine power without the participation of any man is in view (1:34). But here too it is sufficiently clear that it is a begetting, a becoming which is in view, the *coming into existence* of one who will be called, and will in fact *be* the Son of God, not the transition of a preexistent being to become the soul of a human baby or the metamorphosis of a divine being into a human fetus. Luke does state a little more fully and with powerful imagery, the means by which this divine begetting would take place — by the holy spirit coming on Mary, and the power of the most High overshadowing her (1:35). The latter verb (*episkiasei*) may well contain an allusion to the divine presence which overshadowed the tabernacle in the wilderness (Ex. 40:35), but the thought is not that of a divine presence (or being) *becoming* or being embodied in Jesus; in this phrase Luke’s intention is clearly to describe the creative process of begetting... Similarly in Acts there is no sign of any Christology of preexistence.”¹⁰ Dunn quotes John Knox and agrees with him. “For the author of Hebrews Jesus is the Son not in virtue of some precosmic divine existence, but as the pioneer of man’s salvation... The author of Hebrews has no place in his thinking for preexistence as an ontological concept. His essentially human Jesus attains to perfection, to preeminence and even to eternity.”¹¹

The whole idea of preexistence is challenging, though few seem to be aware of any contradiction between the coming into existence of the Son by begetting and the preexistence of the Son in eternity. James Mackey has given much attention to Christology. His chapter on “The Problem of the Preexistence of the Son” begins like this: “It is best with this particular problem, not only because there are linguistic difficulties here — as soon as we recoil from the suggestion that something can preexist itself — we must wonder what exactly, according to this term, preexists what else, and in what sense it does so — but because it leads directly into the main difficulties encountered in all Incarnational and Trinitarian theologies. In addition, though biblical scholars are often not slow to suggest that the constructions of the systematic theologian show themselves to have exegetical feet of clay, it does not take a systematician of any extraordinary degree of skill to notice how exegetes themselves are the unconscious victims in the course of their most professional work of quite dogmatic, that is uncritical systematic assumptions.”¹²

Yes, indeed. What is this curious notion of “preexistence” all about? How is it that no New Testament writer used the perfectly good verb *prouparchein* (to preexist) of the Son of God? How is that Justin Martyr, a hundred years after Jesus, uses it often? How is that the NT speaks of Jesus “coming into existence” *in* and *from* the womb of his mother while Justin thinks of the Son engineering his own Incarnation and coming *through* the womb of his mother? How in fact can the Son be both six months younger than his cousin John and yet billions of years older? Was he really only 30 years old at the inception of his ministry or much, much older? It is the same James Mackey who notes most insightfully that “**spirit** is one of the most ancient symbols in Near Eastern cultures for God and particularly for God’s active presence in our world. **Son** is one of the most powerful natural symbols known by which to express the extension of one’s favor to a person who is the very continuation of one’s effective presence in the world... [It is to say that] God acts in Christ.”¹³ By the spirit, by creative miracle, God produced the Son, the second Adam, and as Son he expresses the Plan, the immortality, Kingdom Plan which invites us to indestructible life, to be gained not by survival of a disembodied soul, but by resurrection/rapture when the Messiah returns to rule on the throne of David.

¹⁰ *Christology in the Making*, 1980, 2nd ed. 1996, pp. 50, 51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹² *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity*, SCM Press, 1983, p. 51.

¹³ James Mackey, *Jesus the Man and the Myth*, Paulist Press, 1979, p. 275. Mackey notes what is hardly surprising, that the anti-Trinitarian birth narratives “have not drawn to themselves nearly as much scholarly attention as they deserve” (p. 273).

Imagine our delight at finding the *Ex Auditu* article of Dr. Brown. Critical of what he calls the “social Trinity,” he speaks of “a systematic misunderstanding of Son-of-God language in Scripture.” Here he puts his finger, surely, on the age-old conflict. Dr. Brown says: **“Indeed one may ask whether the term ‘Son of God’ is in and of itself a divine title at all. Certainly there are many instances in biblical language where it is definitely not a designation of deity.”** He goes on to illustrate his point from the Bible. Then he says: “In the light of these passages in their context, **the title ‘Son of God’ is not in itself a designation of personal deity or an expression of metaphysical distinctions within the Godhead. Indeed to be ‘Son of God’ one has to be a being who is *not* God!** It is a designation for a **creature** indicating a special relationship with God. In particular, it denotes God’s representative, God’s vice-regent. It is a designation of kingship, identifying the king as God’s son.”

A marvelous statement! Should not this be made compulsory reading for every student in every land entering the halls of theological seminaries? Our joy of course was made even fuller when we read in the same article that it is a systematic mistake to read “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30) and statements about the mutual indwelling of Jesus and the Father (John 10:38; 14:10, 11, 20; 17:21, 23) as statements about “inner relations of the ‘persons’ of the Trinity.” “The Fourth Gospel itself does not require such a reading. When read in context the statements are evidently statements about *Jesus’ relationship with the Father on earth.*”

Dr. Brown continues: **“It is a common but patent misreading of the opening of John’s Gospel to read it as if it said: ‘In the beginning was the *Son* and the *Son* was with God and the *Son* was God’ (John 1:1).** What has happened here is the substitution of the *Son* for *Word* (Greek *logos*), and thereby the *Son* is made a member of the Godhead which existed from the beginning. But if we follow carefully the thought of John’s prologue, it is the *Word* that preexisted eternally with God and is God.”

Rediscovering the King Messiah Means Recovering the Messianic Kingdom and the Gospel

Then more recently — in fact within the last few weeks — more encouragement from the astonishing findings of the Bishop of Durham, N.T. Wright, whose public presentations are laced with good British humor. (He also seems to feature in every contemporary documentary about the historical Jesus.) He tells of two men disputing the rapture question. The one says, “You don’t really think that believers are going to be literally caught up in the air to meet Jesus as he comes back?” The other replies, “Yes, I certainly do. And what are you going to say when you see Christians ascending into the sky?” To which his opponent answers, with a note of resignation: “Well, I’ll be damned.”

You need a little humor in otherwise tense theological situations. I have found as a Brit who cannot bring himself, with the Women’s Temperance Movement, to condemn an occasional glass of wine with an evening meal, that this may cause grave consternation in some circles. But I can at least get a smile going when I point out (what is apparently obvious to everyone in the UK though practically no one reads the Bible or goes to church) that Jesus turned 150 gallons of water into wine at a wedding. The Baptists however, not to be outdone, achieved a comparable miracle by turning that wine into Welch’s grape juice.

I don’t think these issues, including the permissibility or otherwise of having shrimp or a pork chop, are ones we need waste five minutes on. But when it comes to the great issues of Incarnation and who the Son of God is, and the relationship of that second Adam to the One God, there is a mass of work to be done. Indeed the religious unity of the world depends on it. At present a billion Muslims believe that Jesus is at least a prophet, in fact virginally begotten, but who did *not die* on the cross, while Jews do not accept that Jesus was the Messiah at all, and others who think Jesus was the Messiah maintain against Matthew and Luke that Joseph was his father. A virginal conception, they say, will not square with the Tanakh, and who are Matthew and Luke to contradict the Tanakh?

But did these writers really say something not derivable from the Hebrew Bible? Had not II Samuel declared that the Messiah would be fathered by God: “I will be his father”? Did not Psalm 2:7 speak of

God begetting His Son, a text which I think Paul applied to the production, that is the origin of the Son in Acts 13:33 (not KJV). Verse 35 refers by contrast to the *resurrection* of the Son from the dead. And did not Isaiah foresee a miraculous sign in the generation of a son from a virgin? *Almah*, young lady, is naturally understood as a “virgin.” Matthew apparently had no difficulty with finding the virginal conception in the Hebrew Bible. And if any ambiguity existed, all doubts about the historical event as a miracle are dispelled by the visiting angel who instructs Matthew and Luke on how those Hebrew predictions of the fathering of the Messiah by God are actually fulfilled.

But back to Tom Wright, Bishop of Durham: He has done brilliantly well to set Jesus in his historical, Jewish setting and remind us that Jesus came to herald the emancipation of Jews and mankind from captivity spiritual and political. Jesus’ mission, says Wright, “looks much more like that of a politician on the campaign trail than a schoolmaster, more like a composer/conductor than a violin teacher...He was a herald, the bringer of an urgent message that could not wait, could not become the stuff of academic debate. He was issuing a public announcement, like someone driving through a town with a loud hailer. He was issuing a public warning, like a man with a red flag heading off an imminent railway disaster. He was issuing a public invitation, like someone setting up a new political party and summoning all and sundry to sign up and help create a new world.”¹⁴

What contribution to that endeavor would the current advocacy of same sex marriage have made? And are not current attempts to “get individuals saved” very different from Jesus’ intense Kingdom evangelism?

Wright describes the Kingdom of God language of early Christians as “a kind of shorthand summary of the preaching and apologetic message of the church, or indeed for the whole of what Christianity was about...A way of identifying the *raison d’etre* of the whole Christian movement.”¹⁵ This is a powerful confirmation of the Abrahamic Faith. Only a few weeks back Sean Finnegan, in typical Abrahamic style, was urging us to be “Kingdom ready.”

Just as J.A.T. Robinson of Cambridge was reminding us that “heaven in the Bible is nowhere the destination of the dying,”¹⁶ Bishop Wright calls the church away from the all-pervasive language of “heaven” as the destiny of Christians to the exciting language of Kingdom of God. “What shall I do to go to heaven?” sounds strangely unlike Jesus, and should not Christians who claim to share the mind of Christ echo his language — particularly in the matter of the destiny of man and of salvation? Do not many evangelicals in fact deny the Second Coming of Christ when they appear to have him make a U-turn, disappearing once more into the sky? Is that really a Second Coming at all?

Bishop Wright has this to say: “I have become increasingly aware of a mismatch between what the earliest Christians believed about life after death...and what many ordinary Christians seem to believe on the subject today...and I have come to the conclusion that what we do and say on this subject is increasingly at odds with anything that can be justified from the Bible or the earliest Christian tradition...My fear is that we have been simply drifting into a muddle and a mess putting together bits and pieces of traditions, ideas and practices in the hope that they will make sense. They don’t. There may be times when a typical Anglican fudge is a pleasant, chewy sort of a thing, but this isn’t one of them. It is time to think and speak clearly and to act decisively.” He complains that “sometimes ‘resurrection’ has even come to be used as a synonym for ‘going to heaven,’ which is about as misleading as it can be.” Wright wants, as we do, to “question this tradition [of ‘going to heaven when you die’] which has supplied the mental furniture of millions of Christians...The Protestant Reformers of the 16th century achieved a remarkable coup in abolishing the doctrine of purgatory, but they left much of the traditional picture of heaven and hell unchallenged, and never really explained how either

¹⁴ *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Fortress Press, 1996, p. 172.

¹⁵ *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 215.

¹⁶ *In the End God*, p. 104.

of them fitted into the NT language about resurrection.”¹⁷ The Bishop continues: “We should remember especially that the use of the word ‘heaven’ to denote the ultimate goal of the redeemed, though hugely emphasized by medieval piety, mystery plays, and the like, and still almost universal at the popular level, is *severely misleading* and does not begin to do justice to the Christian hope. I am repeatedly frustrated by how hard it is to get this point through the thick wall of traditional thought and language that most Christians put up. ‘Going to heaven when you die’ is not held out in the NT as the main goal...and nothing is said in the NT about the death, or the state thereafter, of the mother of Jesus.”¹⁸

Listen to how Tom Wright underlines the theme which really got this whole denomination going. The call for a return to the Gospel as the Gospel of the Kingdom is clear. Luther’s amazing dictum that the synoptic Gospels are relatively unimportant as a source of the Gospel and C.S. Lewis’ astonishing claim that “the Gospel is not in the Gospels” come directly and I think rightly under the Bishop’s fire: “The church’s use of the Gospels has given scant attention to what the Gospels themselves are saying about the actual events of Jesus’ life and his Kingdom proclamation [Gospel of salvation]...Therefore the church is in effect sitting on but paying no attention to a central part of its own tradition that might, perhaps, revitalize or reform the church significantly were it to be investigated...This must involve understanding what the Gospels are saying about Jesus **within the world of first-century Judaism**, not within the imagination of subsequent piety (or impiety)...To content oneself with a non-historical Christ of faith seems to me...demonstrably false to NT Christianity.”¹⁹

Let me finish with a word or two about “spirit” and “word.” (If you do not own the excellent *New International Dictionary of NT Theology*, ed. by Dr. Brown, I thoroughly recommend it.) You will find it a splendid guide to the words of Scripture. There is a tendency in current popular theology to divorce the terms “spirit” and “word.” But are not words and word merely the verbal expression of the spirit and the mind? Job 28:6 seems to make this point beautifully. Job said to his “counselors”: “With whose help have you uttered **words** and whose **spirit** has come forth from you?” The one sentence defines the other. Proverbs 1:23 reports Lady Wisdom as promising, if we repent, to “pour out my **spirit** on you and make my **words** known to you.” The RSV actually renders the Hebrew *ruach* (spirit) as “thoughts.” And the NIV says: “I would have poured out my **heart** to you.” Thought, mind, spirit and heart are virtually interchangeable, as when Paul in I Corinthians 2:16 says, “Who has known the mind (*nous*) of the Lord?” quoting Isaiah 40:13 which reads, “Who has directed the spirit (*ruach*) of the Lord?” David described his own experience by saying that “the **spirit** of the Lord speaks by me; his **word** is on my tongue” (II Sam 23:2).

Since “word (of God)” in the NT is so often just a synonym for the saving Gospel of the Kingdom (Matt. 13:19) could there be any greater loss than a vague comprehension of “word”? It seems to me to be most helpful when Dr. Brown speaks of Jesus mediating the **spirit** before Pentecost. In other words, Jesus mediated “spirit” by communicating his own Gospel-words. He himself taught that his words “are spirit and life” (John 6:63). Thus a “spirit” Christology and a “word” Christology are very much the same thing. Jesus is the expression of the mind and spirit of God and Jesus conveys that mind/heart/spirit of God through his words. The greatest disaster for theology and preaching would be any loss of the word/Gospel as Jesus preached it. This would immediately lead to a loss of spirit and thus a loss of the presence and power of God. No wonder then Paul described the word/Gospel of the Kingdom which he preached in Thessalonica as “the word of God” which is “energizing you” (I Thess. 2:13). Satan, knowing this, is dedicated to “snatching away the Gospel/word of Jesus from their hearts, so that they will not believe [it] and be saved” (Luke 8:12).

¹⁷ *For All the Saints*, SPCK, 2003, pp. xii, 2, 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 23.

¹⁹ *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*, p. 251.

With such an army of informed Kingdom-Gospel preachers as I see gathered here, who knows what may happen if we rattle the cages of “orthodoxy” with our conviction that Jesus is the Messianic Son of God and that the Gospel in the Bible is always about the Kingdom of God and how to enter it when Jesus returns. And who knows what interest we may be able to stir up amongst Jews and Muslims when we announce our belief that God is not two and not three but the One Lord God of the *Shema* and Jesus’ own confession (Mark 12:28ff).

Appendix 1

More Encouragement from Scholars

From Dr. Willibald Beyschlag’s (1823-1900) *New Testament Theology*, Vol. 2, Eng. trans by Neil Buchanan, T & T Clark, 1899. Professor Beyschlag was an evangelical theologian at Halle in Germany. This is what he wrote in his section on “the Only-Begotten,” p. 414.

“The Christological thought of the NT unquestionably reaches its highest point in John; but it is not essentially different from the other doctrinal systems. Although some, blinded by the prologue of John’s Gospel, which seems to favor the [later] dogmatic tradition, have sought in John a lofty speculative picture of Christ. This is an error. John’s picture of Christ did not originate in theological speculation but in the living impression of the historical personality as that very prologue (v. 14) attests: ‘We beheld his glory, the glory of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.’ And it is still more emphatically established in the introduction to his Epistle: ‘That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of Life; that we declared to you’ (I John 1:1). But this also excludes the notion that the Johannine Christology is akin to that of the great Councils, which start from the Divinity of Christ and from that pass to his humanity. For John the converse is true. The Jesus who made on the evangelist the impression of being the eternal Word made flesh, was at first for him a man (John 8:40), the Master from Nazareth, whose father, mother, brothers and sisters were known to the people and to every disciple (John 1:45; 6:42; 7:27).

“And it would be a complete perversion to suppose that this humanity of Jesus was for John something indifferent or even only apparent. Not only does he prefer, both in the doctrinal and narrative parts of his book, to call him by his human name Jesus, but we may say that he has made the recognition or denial of the perfect humanity of Jesus the distinguishing point of Christianity and anti-Christianity. The false teachers of the first Epistle like those modern teachers who find in Jesus only the historical embodiment of an idea of the Son of God, which was not truly or perfectly realized in him, represented Jesus only as a temporary embodiment of the heavenly Christ, and thus they taught that the latter had not truly come *en sarki*, in a true human nature. The original text is not ‘come *into* the flesh,’ as Luther inaccurately translated it, but ‘come in the flesh.’ To John those who deny the perfect humanity of Jesus are antichrists (I John 2:8) and he places in opposition to them, as the fundamental Christian confession, ‘the Christ who has come in the flesh’ (I John 4:2)...The Johannine Christ acknowledges all human dependence upon God, and this dependence extends to his state of exaltation. As the Risen One he still calls the Father his God (John 20:17). And it is simply not true, what is so often asserted, that John conceived his Christ as omniscient and omnipotent. Wonderful in its extent as his knowledge and his power in John’s picture were, yet he had to ask at the grave of Lazarus, ‘Where have you laid him?’ and he could declare, ‘I can do nothing of myself.’ We cannot say that John represents him as omniscient or omnipotent (John 5:19).

“As in the whole NT, so in John, the loftiness and uniqueness of Christ rest on the basis of his human nature; but to him it is not a relative but an absolute uniqueness. Christ is among the children of men the uniquely begotten, *monogenes*. First of all this uniqueness is to him a moral one lying in his perfect sinlessness: ‘there was no sin in him’ (I John 3:5). As Peter does, both in his Epistles and his speeches, John in his Epistle repeatedly accentuates the example of the holiness and righteousness of Jesus. 2:1: ‘Jesus Christ the righteous.’ 3:7: ‘Everyone who has this hope in him sanctifies himself, just as he is holy — the one practicing righteousness is righteous, just as that one [Jesus] is righteous.’

“That by this not metaphysical and divine, but human attributes are meant, is shown (I John 2:6) by the comparison of Jesus’ walk with ours. And in itself it cannot be doubtful from what Jesus says of himself in the Gospel (5:30; 8:29; 15:10). Now this absolute faultlessness rested, in John’s view, on this moral uniqueness, as we have shown from the words of Jesus which he reports, that absolute communion with God, which he

describes as being ‘in the Father’, and as a being and dwelling of the Father in him, from which spring the miraculous works of Jesus as well as his words of life and all that makes him the Savior of the world. ‘The Father does not leave me alone because I always do the things which are pleasing to Him.’ ‘The Father who dwells in me, He does the works.’ ‘The Father loves the Son and shows him all things.’ ‘I am in the Father and the Father is in me; the words I speak I do not speak from myself.’ ‘The Father who sent me has given me a commandment what to say and what to speak.’ ‘As the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted to the Son to have life in himself.’ That is the fundamental thought of John’s Christology, and on it rest those great utterances about Christ which we have to consider more closely: Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is the logos...Jesus is the Father’s bosom friend, who, resting on the heart of the eternal Father, can reveal to us His innermost thoughts and feelings” (see p. 419). “In John we have the peculiarly Johannine addition to ‘Son of God,’ the word ‘uniquely begotten,’ *monogenes*. This concept has nothing to do with the Trinitarian ‘eternal generation’ of the later Church doctrine. It simply transfers the relation of the only child of human parents (Luke 7:12) to that of the man Jesus to his heavenly Father...From all this it should not surprise us if the Apostle designates the Only-begotten as *theos* (God) and he does so by the mouth of Thomas. But it must not be forgotten that the usage of the Old Testament did not refuse this name even to the king (Ps. 45). On the other hand the reading *monogenes theos* (only-begotten God) in John 1:18, though well attested, is on internal grounds very improbable immediately after ‘No one has ever seen God at any time.’ And I consider it to be quite impossible to refer the ‘this is the true God and eternal life’ in I John 5:20 to him who is immediately before named Son, instead of to the Father, who has twice before been designated ‘true.’ The same Apostle who makes Jesus describe the Father (John 17:3) as the only one who is truly God, could not so directly contradict himself as to assert alongside of ‘only one who is truly God’ a second ‘true God’” (p. 420).

Appendix 2

The Eternal Generation of the Son

The really vulnerable element in the doctrine of the preexisting Son is the concept that he was **eternally begotten**. It is doubtful if this expression contains any more meaning than hot ice cubes — as many have pointed out.

Nathaniel Emmons of Yale (1745-1850) declared that “‘eternal generation’ is eternal nonsense.” Emmons was a keen logician with a terse and lucid theological style.

In our time Donald McCloed, *The Person of Christ* (Intervarsity Press, 1998), tackles the issue of the “eternal generation” of the Son: “The idea of eternal generation is an inevitable corollary of the **eternal sonship** and figures prominently in the statements of the Nicene fathers and their successors. **But it is far from clear what content, if any, we can impart to the concept.** It is revealed, but it is revealed as mystery and the writings of the fathers abound in protestations of inevitable ignorance of the matter. Athanasius says of it:

‘Nor again is it right to seek how God begets [Luke 1 and Matt. 1 do supply this information] and what is the manner of his begetting. For a man must be beside himself to venture on such points; since a thing ineffable [unspeakable] and proper to God’s nature and known to Him alone and the Son, this he demands to be explained in words. It is better in perplexity to be silent and believe than to disbelieve on account of perplexity.’

Gregory of Nazianzen: ‘But the manner of the Son’s generation we will not admit that even angels can conceive, much less you [Gabriel announced it very clearly in Luke 1:32-35]. Shall I tell you how it was? It was in a manner known to the Father who begat, and to the Son who was begotten. Anything more than this is hidden by a cloud and escapes your dim sight.’

McCleod then comments: “The church insisted that divine generation cannot be understood in terms of human generation. Here again Athanasius set the tone for subsequent theology: ‘As then men create not as God creates, as their being is not such as God’s being, so man’s generation is in one way, and the Son is from the Father in another...Whereas in human generation a father always exists prior to a son, in divine generation this is not so.’ Athanasius writes, ‘Nor, as man from man has the Son been begotten, so as to be later than his Father’s existence, but is God’s offspring, and, as being proper Son of God, who is ever, he exists eternally. For whereas it is proper to men to beget in time, from the imperfection of their nature, God’s offspring is eternal, for His nature is ever perfect...‘God, Whose nature and existence are above time, may not engender in time’” (John of Damascus).

Thus God is forbidden to act, in time, within His own creation.

McCleod: “To beget does not mean to originate. In human generation, of course, it does, but in divine generation it does not...The Son was not unbegotten, but he was Unoriginate. The Father was both Unoriginate and Unbegotten. This implies a clear distinction between being begotten and being originated.” Gregory of Nazianzen: ‘The Son was unoriginatedly begotten.’

But all this is simply to rewrite the laws of language and meaning and then claim that the Bible authorizes this massive departure from the historical and grammatical method. It was bound to lead to confusion and it has. The falsehood of the whole idea was spotted by Adam Clark, the famous Methodist expositor, and many others. Clark felt it necessary to say:

“The doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ is in my opinion antiscritptural and highly dangerous. I have not been able to find any express declaration of it in the Scriptures.”²⁰

And yet without the “eternal generation” of the Son there is no doctrine of the Trinity.

J.O. Buswell, former Dean of the Graduate School, Covenant College, St. Louis, MO, examined the issue of the begetting of the Son in the Bible and concluded with these words. He wrote as a Trinitarian:

“The notion that the Son was begotten by the Father in eternity past, not as an event, but as an inexplicable relationship, has been accepted and carried along in the Christian theology since the fourth century...We have examined all the instances in which ‘begotten’ or ‘born’ or related words are applied to Christ, and we can say with confidence that the Bible has nothing whatsoever to say about ‘begetting’ as an eternal relationship between the Father and the Son.”²¹

Why does a leading Roman Catholic scholar admit that Luke 1:35 is an embarrassment to orthodox scholars?

“Luke 1:35 has embarrassed many orthodox theologians, since in preexistence [Trinitarian] theology a conception by the Holy Spirit in Mary’s womb does *not* bring about the existence of God’s Son. Luke is seemingly unaware of such a Christology; conception is causally related to divine Sonship for him.”²²

Dr Wardlaw, *Discourses on the Socinian Controversy* (1815), pp. 352, 353: “I entertain strong doubts about the correctness of the notion, commonly received, of what is called the eternal generation of the Son from the Father...My own conviction is that the title, Son of God, has no reference to the eternal generation in the essence of Deity, but to the supernatural constitution of the mediatorial person of Christ.”

Volkelius (Johannes Völkel), Socinian leader (d. 1618), *De Vera Religione*, lib. v, c. xi, p. 470: “As to the fact that it is affirmed that the Son of God was generated from all eternity from the essence of the Father, it will be strongly resolved that such a proposition is both absurd and clearly among those propositions of which no sense can be made. Moreover it cannot be affirmed from the testimony of the sacred writings. For the proposition is self-contradictory. For if the Son is generated — he did not exist from all eternity, but there was a time when he did not yet exist. For every generation, especially a substantial generation, as they call it, and properly so, is a change from non-being to being.”

Roell (1653-1718), *Of the Generation of the Son*, pp. 21, 22, 27: “It is necessary in order to discuss among ourselves ideas about a divine Person and about generation properly speaking that we understand whether it is possible to reconcile that idea of the generation of Deity properly speaking. For it is impossible to conceive, properly speaking, of the generation of a truly Divine Person if we thus overthrow the idea of Deity. If an active begetting is attributed to him who is served, in order that it be *voluntary* to a purely reasonable being or at least gifted with reason, an act of begetting is required. From this it is clear that in a generation, properly spoken, the generator is prior to the one generated [so Father precedes the Son!]. And since properly speaking ‘to be generated’ means to have one’s origin from someone else and to have received that essence from another by generation, **it is not possible that a Divine Person be generated properly speaking, since the idea of a Divine Person implies necessary existence independent from all other causes.** Moreover, since it will never be true of a Divine Person that he was not, it is incompatible with that idea that he is produced, no matter in

²⁰ *Commentary on Luke 1:35.*

²¹ *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, Zondervan, 1962, p. 110.

²² Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 291.

what sense that word is used. For to be eternal means never not to have existed, to be incapable of non-existence, and to be truly from oneself and one's own nature. And since, besides, whatever generates produces what he generates from himself, and since he is the cause of that existence, it is necessary for him to preexist the one generated. For how can one who does not exist generate, or how can one who exists be generated?"

"Orthodoxy," beginning with Origen, and followed by the Roman Catholic Church and later by Protestant Reformation leader Martin Luther, denied that "today" in Psalm 2:7 means today:

Primasius (Bishop, 6th century, *Commentary on Revelation*, based on Tyconius and Augustine) on Hebrews 1:5 (in Westcott): "He does not say 'Before all ages I have begotten you,' nor in past time; but '*today*,' he says, 'I have begotten you.' **The adverb refers to present time. For in God neither do past things go by nor do future things follow.** But to God the whole of time is joined together. And so the meaning is: 'Just as I am eternal and have no beginning and no end, thus I have you [the Son] coeternally with me.'"

But if God said "today," can He not mean it?