

Equivalency as the Key to Making Sense of the Bible

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First a reminder of the one with whom we have chosen to be associated:

“JESUS CHRIST. Wanted — for sedition, criminal anarchy, vagrancy and conspiring to overthrow the established government. Dresses poorly. Said to be a carpenter by trade. Has visionary ideas, associates with common working people, the unemployed and bums. Alien — believed to be a Jew. Alias: Prince of Peace, Son of Man, Light of the World. Professional agitator, red beard, marks on hands and feet the result of injuries inflicted by an angry mob led by respectable citizens, churchgoers and authorities.”

Secondly, what is the point of our attempts at solid, illuminating Bible study? The words of Scripture are living words with permanent value, as transmitting life now and life forever. “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not,” Jesus said (Matt. 24:35). Wisdom offered to “pour out my *spirit*” on us, which is equivalent to “making my *words* known to you” (Prov. 1:23). Test the spirits by testing the words, John exhorted us in I John 4:1-6. “Whose spirit are you expressing with your words?” asks Job in 26:4. “The *spirit* of the Lord spoke through the mouth of David, and thus God’s *words* were on David’s lips” (see II Sam. 23:1-2). What was true of the sweet singer of Israel should be true of us. Confusion over the words of Scripture leads to a reduction and blockage of spirit.

Pop, soda and coke. I have learned that various people, sharing a common American heritage and language, nevertheless confuse us when they speak of their favorite drink.

Just imagine how bewildering all this can be for the foreigner not trained in the ins and outs of language usage. I believe the public is equally flummoxed when trying to read the Bible. I remember, of course, as a child of 13 at boarding school making every year a firm resolution to read the NT and failing after about 2 chapters of genealogical lists of unpronounceable names in Matthew. I could not make heads or tails of it. I did not know the language. Oh, I knew English all right but had no idea about the meaning of key terms: Son of God, Kingdom of God, even God. When I later asked the clergyman about Matthew 5:5 and inheriting the earth, he said “good question, lad; I will have to think about it,” and when I also asked if he preached on the second coming, he said that was the one sermon he really hated doing, though he was supposed to tackle the subject once a year, on Advent Sunday.

The confused situation today (30,000 denominations) is akin to the story of the king in the OT who took his scissors and cut up the text of Scripture and threw it in the fire.¹ People are cutting up the text, failing to put the pieces of the puzzle together to make a harmonious, intelligible whole and suffering the inevitable consequences of non-comprehension. 2% of 7 million Londoners are attending church regularly. They apparently are not interested in Jesus nor in their own destiny. How can they *not* find the Bible a captivatingly interesting book? I think they need help in understanding it.

Jesus was insistent on a good understanding (“Have you understood these things?” Matt. 13:51). John says Jesus came to give us “an understanding in order to know God” (I John 5:20) and Isaiah 53:11 says that the Messiah makes righteous “by his knowledge.”

Not understanding the words of Jesus and the NT is something to be avoided on pain of death. Jesus makes the reception of his creative, saving words the absolute hallmark of successful Christianity. At the climax of his ministry in John 12 Jesus *shouts* (he does this rarely, but he also used to shout or cry out when he gave his explanation of the sower parable, Luke 8:8).² Jesus shouts in John 12:44 for good reason. Our immortality depends on our listening to the words of Jesus, the ultimate prophet (Deut 18:15-18). “The person who believes in me...believes in the One who commissioned me” (that is, appointed me as His agent). “I came as a light. If someone *hears my words* and does not keep them, I don’t judge him. I

¹Jeremiah 36:23: “And it came to pass that when Jehudi had read three or four leaves, he cut it with the scribe’s pen-knife, and cast it into the fire on the hearth, until all the roll was consumed in the fire.”

²Note the imperfect tense here: “he customarily used to raise his voice...”

didn't come to judge but to save. The person who refuses, rejects and will not receive *my words* has one who judges him. The very word I spoke will judge him on the last day" (John 12:44-48).

If we were the Devil, we would work hard at making the words of Jesus incomprehensible. We could still, however, safely ask people to "accept Jesus." That would sound reassuring!

Accepting Jesus is here precisely defined as equivalent to accepting the word(s) of Jesus. Peter speaks about both "obedience to Jesus *and* the sprinkling of his blood" (I Pet. 1:2). And the words of Jesus are summarized of course under the umbrella term Gospel of the Kingdom. Why then is the public constantly asked to "accept Jesus" and never "to accept the Kingdom Gospel word and words of Jesus"? Failure to perceive the equivalency principle (accept, believe in Jesus = accept the words of Jesus) causes them a lot of grief.

Pursuing the equivalency principle further: Does John use the word "faith" (*pistis* in Greek)? Actually no, not really; once only in the epistles. Then John did not have anything to say about faith? If you take evidence woodenly, he did not. He said almost nothing about faith. But this conclusion would be absurd.

John in fact used the more dynamic *verb* "to believe," constantly. So he did have lots to say about belief or faith. Did John use the word "Gospel"? Not once. So he was not interested in the Gospel? Nonsense. He prefers the very strong and legally tinged word "testimony" and the verb "testify." He did not use the verb "to proclaim" or "to evangelize," but he believed in both concepts passionately. He just used other vocabulary to cover the same concepts. He engaged in "equations" or "equivalencies." "The testimony or gospel of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev. 19:10). So the Gospel of the Kingdom is the spirit of prophecy. God's people are to be prophets of the coming Kingdom.

Paul uttered his famous last words to Timothy by solemnly testifying to both "the Coming and Kingdom. Preach the word" (II Tim. 4:1, 2). The "word" is equivalent here as often elsewhere to the Gospel of the Kingdom.

Not to see these "equivalencies" is consciously or unconsciously to compartmentalize and fragment the NT and to fail to see its great unifying message. It is to read the Bible in a fog.

Did Jesus believe in justification? Did he teach this as the basis of a right relationship with God? Everyone knows that Paul did. His rather heavy (as it now sounds to us, and as it is now translated, after all the endless argumentation about "justification") language has become the standard for many when talking about salvation. But did Jesus use the word "justify," verb or noun? Certainly not the noun, and very rarely the verb. He spoke of the man who, unlike the pious Pharisee, pleaded with God for mercy, as "justified."³ Jesus did say that we are to be justified by what we say or fail to say. "For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matt. 12:37). But the word "justify" is very rare in the recorded sayings of Jesus.

So did Jesus not believe in "justification," being right with God rather than wrong, "straight" before God rather than "crooked" before God? Of course he did. Jesus was deeply interested in our being right before God. He came to save the lost. Jesus spoke about us being *forgiven*, and he meant the same thing. Did Paul use the noun forgiveness in his letters often? Not really. Twice in the late epistles, not in Romans at all. Paul used the verb "forgave" once only, in Colossians 3:3. Paul prefers the word "justify," to put right, to pronounce pardoned, telling us that we are no longer on spiritual death row.

Romans 4 demonstrates this principle of equivalency beautifully and — most important — unifies Paul with Jesus. In Romans Paul is making his point about "justification" (the Greek noun is related to the verb being right or righteous, right with God rather than wrong with God). Romans 4:3: "Abraham believed God and it was counted in his favor as making him right, justified." In the same breath Paul goes on, pulling in another proof text, this time from the Psalms: "How delightful it is for the man, how blessed is he whose lawlessness has been **forgiven**" (vv. 7, 8). No difference between being forgiven and being justified. Paul quotes two proof texts relating to OT heroes to make his point about justification. It means to be forgiven like David, when we believe like Abraham. And if we were in any doubt Luke reports Paul's famous sermon in Antioch where he announced "I want you to know that through Jesus

³Luke 18:14: "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you” (Acts 13:38). In Acts, Luke simplifies Paul for us, reporting his teaching in more popular and less “scholarly” language.

Talking about using two equivalent proof-texts to teach one’s point, note Hebrews 1:5 where we have a brilliant bringing together of II Samuel 7:14 and Psalm 2:7: “I will be the Messiah’s father” and “Today I have begotten you” both point to the all-important *origin* of the Son of God in Mary.

Did John use the word “repent” or “repentance”? Not once in all his writings. But of course John very much believed in our repenting. He included it no doubt in the idea of believing after forsaking sin, which he described as failure to believe in Jesus. Yes, sin means not believing in or believing Jesus (John 16:9). And believing in Jesus or believing Jesus (which are also equivalent, I think) means believing in the words of Jesus. No words of Jesus, no Jesus. We are what we think and say. “If you won’t believe in Moses and his writings how can you believe my words?” (Jesus said in John 5:47). “He who hears my word [thus] believes the one who sent me” (John 5:24). “Whoever does not accept the Kingdom of God as a child will not enter it” (Luke 18:17). This is equivalent to being born again by accepting the Kingdom Gospel.

Some Tricks

Did Jesus preach *the Gospel*? Evangelicals I have asked are not quite sure. Did he not just die for the Gospel? they sometimes say.⁴ According to your Greek texts and some good translations, Jesus preached the Gospel and Paul preached the Gospel. But the NIV, which we need to watch carefully, allows Jesus to preach the *Good News* of the Kingdom, but never the Gospel of the Kingdom. The NIV very inconsistently allows the word Gospel and Kingdom to occur together *only* in Matthew 24:14! They destroy the *equivalency* of Good News and Gospel (same word *evangelion* in Greek) by giving the impression that these are different. This is about as bad as saying that Kingdom of Heaven is not the equivalent of Kingdom of God.⁵

Here is another equivalence. Repenting, believing the Gospel of the Kingdom, and being forgiven are all one package, the key to conversion and regeneration (Luke 8:12; Mark 4:11, 12). But evangelicals have been taught not to see that equivalence. They have been instructed out of Paul and particularly Romans. They have been told that the Gospel is in Romans 10:9, 10, “confess Jesus and believe God resurrected him,” but they were not pointed to the equivalent, defining concept in v. 17. Believing, Paul said, originates in hearing *the Gospel* of Christ, i.e., the Gospel of the Kingdom as Jesus preached it. Evangelicals do not know that Paul and Jesus taught the same Gospel truths, using different language. Evangelicals do not know that Jesus’ parable of the sower and the seed is implied by Paul in his words about being “born of the spirit” and “born of the promise” (Gal. 4:28). Missing in their system is the equivalence between “preaching the word” and “proclaiming Christ” (Acts 8:4, 5) and “preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom and the name of Christ” (Acts 8:12).

John reports Jesus as saying that being “born again” is the absolute condition for entering the Kingdom. The synoptics report nothing from Jesus about being “born again.” How is this possible? Only on the principle of equivalency: they speak of regeneration by the power of the seed/word Gospel of the Kingdom.

Here is how the NT salvation program works, I suggest. Three corroborating accounts of Jesus’ major theology of salvation are found in the parable of the sower (which is also a parable about parables, because Jesus said that if you don’t understand this one you cannot understand any of the parables). All three accounts speak of the believer being given the mystery (or equivalent “mysteries”) of the Kingdom. To be given this wonderful revelation of course implies the holy spirit of illumination, but one does not have to have the word “spirit” there, because the illuminating power of the word is sufficient to imply the spirit. Jesus then described the typically disappointing effects of preaching the Gospel. The audience will

⁴Cp. Billy Graham: “Jesus came to do three days work, to die, be buried and rise.” “Half the Gospel is the death of Jesus and the other half is his resurrection.”

⁵Chuck Swindoll seems uncertain about this equivalence. “...*seem* to refer to the same thing” (*Understanding Christian Theology*, p. 1224).

tend not to understand it. They will resist the word and the spirit. Then Jesus said this: “If they did understand the word, they would repent and be forgiven.” In other words, “if they did, they would be in a position to repent and be forgiven...Unless they do, they cannot repent and be forgiven.” NASV is equally clear: Otherwise, i.e., conditioned on an intelligent reception of the Gospel of the Kingdom, which by equivalence is called “word of the Kingdom” (Matt.), “word of God” (Luke), or just “word” (Mark) — on *condition that they understand the Kingdom*, they can repent and receive forgiveness. Otherwise they cannot. This is the equivalent statement to that of Jesus in John 12:47: Receiving Jesus means receiving *his word(s)* and his word is embraced by the phrase Kingdom of God Gospel. Accepting Jesus is the constant equivalent to believing his word and words (and of course keeping them and living out of them).

One of the greatest equivalencies is the practical equation of word and spirit. As William Barclay says so well: “The word is the agent of rebirth. In Jewish thinking a word was more than a sound expressing a meaning: a word actually did things. The word of God is not simply a sound. It is an effective cause. In the creation story God’s *word creates*. ‘By the word of the Lord the heavens were made’ (Ps. 33:6, 9). ‘He sent his word and healed them’ (Ps. 107:20). God’s word will accomplish all that God pleases (Isa. 55:11). God’s word not only said things. It did things.”⁶ God’s word also melts ice (Ps. 147:18).

Friedrich Buchsel: “A reception of the spirit without preceding proclamation of the Gospel does not occur in Luke. **The connection between word and spirit is inseparable.**”⁷ The one involves the other. They are bound up with each other.

No wonder then that Paul said that the Gospel word of the Kingdom is “the power of God leading to salvation” (Rom. 1:16). The wrong gospel destroys the power of God in our lives.

What is said here can be said equally of the creative activity of God’s spirit. People who look for the spirit in all sorts of places outside the creative, energetic words of God are liable to fall for “another spirit.” I love this great watchword of Jesus: “The words that I speak to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63). He was only saying what Zechariah 7:12 had said: “They made their hearts *like* flint so that they could not hear the law and *the words* which the LORD of hosts had sent by His *Spirit* through the former prophets; therefore great wrath came from the LORD of hosts.”

Did Jesus use the word “grace”? Not in the records we have of his sayings, but when he said “to you it has been *given* [by God, divine passive] to know the mystery of the Kingdom” (Mark 4:11) grace of course is implied. It is the equivalent and does not have to be stated. If one is in the know, and someone says he drinks soda, everyone ought to know that he drinks pop!

Long ago in his popular English lectures *The Religion of Jesus and the Faith of Paul* (1923) philologist Adolf Deissmann attempted to mark out the path that scholars should take in dealing with the various theological terms in Paul’s letters. So, for example, when speaking of Paul’s teaching on justification, Deissman wrote:

“According to my conception, justification is not the quintessence of Paulinism, but one witness among others to his experience of salvation. Justification is *one* ancient picture-word. Alongside many others, justification is one note, which, along with many others — redemption, adoption, etc. — is harmonized in the one chord that testifies to salvation” (271).

Similarly on the variety of terms used by Paul, Deissman wrote:

“The impression of complexity [in Paul] has only arisen because we have not understood the similes as similes which were *synonymous with one another*, though to the mind of antiquity they would easily have been so understood. The single so-called Pauline ideas have been isolated by us, and then the attempt has been made to reconstruct a chronological order of salvation, an ‘*ordo salutis*,’ as our ancestors called it. As a matter of fact, the religion of Paul is something quite simple. It is communion with Christ” (222-223).

⁶*New Testament Words*.

⁷*Der Geist Gottes im Neuen Testament* (Gutersloh, 1926, p. 256-7), quoted by Bruner, *Theology of the Holy Spirit*, p. 205.

Dr. James Denney reflects the same idea: “The fact that all who speak to us in the NT are familiar with the experience of the holy spirit does not always make it easier for us to understand them. It is clear that various experiences are described in this way and we cannot refrain from asking whether experiences which *one writer recounts without any reference to the spirit would have been explained as pneumatic by another, or vice versa.*”⁸

Yes, Paul’s concepts are essentially quite simple. The NT presents a single unified salvation message. It is all about communion with Christ, and it is communion with Christ by thinking like Christ, which is sharing his heart which is virtually equivalent to his mind, his spirit and his words. Paul can refer to the spirit of God as equivalent to the spirit of Christ and both are equivalent to the mind of Christ. And mind of course is equivalent to the words proceeding from the mind (equivalent to heart). Words are mind in action, and verbalized spirit. Thus this equivalency is so beautifully put in Zechariah 7:12: “God sent His words via His spirit in the prophets.”

“Spirit denotes the seat of cognition and volition... Often RUACH (spirit) means mind.”⁹

And *logos* in John 1:1 means mind, says Dr. Colin Brown.

One of the most brilliant things John recorded is in 6:63. Jesus said: “The words I have spoken to you *are* spirit and life.” Yes, words are spirit; they convey spirit. They transmit spirit. The mind of the spirit is the mind of God and of Jesus. John, late in the New Testament period, resorts to the strongest possible language to fend off all the pseudo-spirits which are confusing the truth. In the gospel he calls the spirit “the spirit of the truth,” and this is equivalent to the comforter which in I John 2:1 is the equivalent of Jesus himself, that is Jesus who for Paul is “the Lord, the spirit” (II Cor. 3:18). So the comforter, the Paraclete is none other than the risen Jesus returning to his people as the guiding and reassuring presence of the spirit and of truth. Truth is expressed in words, of course. In I John 5:6 John actually says “the spirit IS the truth” (both with definite article making them identical). In II John he has dropped the word spirit altogether. Has John given up belief in the spirit? Of course not. But the false spirits are crowding in on the church (has anything changed today?). He uses equivalent language and speaks of “Truth” being with the believers, rather than the spirit being with them. Here is a wonderfully instructive equivalency: Spirit = truth. And of course Jesus had already said, “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). “Spirit with us,” “Truth with us,” “spirit of truth/comforter with us” = “Jesus with us.” “Word abiding in us” = “anointing spirit abiding in us” = “Christ in us” = “seed in us.”¹⁰

Look at this wonderful equivalence: “Let the *word* of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col. 3:16) = “Go on allowing yourself to be filled with *spirit*” (Eph. 5:18).

Pentecostalism, it seems to me, tries to pull all this apart and thus divorce the spirit from the truth, introducing another “spirit.” At its most extreme, its doctrine is “tongues on your lips” = essential evidence of “the spirit in you.” No tongues, no salvation. This is a tragic mistake. That is a cruel form of legalism. No wonder John says “test the spirits,” that is, test the words and teaching coming from a given exponent of “spirit.” Does that spirit tell you clearly about the human, historical Jesus, “the having-come-as-a human-being Jesus” (so the Greek) or is it another Jesus? (See the theological test in I John 4:1-6). The test was not the “tongues test.” Other freak tests today are “the right pronunciation of Yahweh,” calling Jesus “Yeshua” (or Yahshuah!) as necessary for salvation; or calculating the right day for observing Pentecost, or agreeing to an *extreme* form of non-resistance, far beyond the well-established Anabaptist principle of non-violence.

Jesus’ Creed Is the Jewish Creed

The most instructive equivalency of all is that One God creed which unites Jesus with Deuteronomy 6:4. In Mark 12:28-34 we see Jesus in conversation with a genuine truth-seeking unitarian scribe (professional Bible scholar). And Jesus confirms the creed of Israel as the true creed. Imagine the chaos when this equivalency between the Shema and Jesus’ creed is said to be inadmissible! The introduction of

⁸ “Holy Spirit,” *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, Vol. I, p. 731.

⁹ *Dictionary of OT Theology and Exegesis*, Vol. 3, p.1075.

¹⁰ See this nicely laid out by Raymond Brown in Appendix 1, *Gospel According to John*, Vol 1, p. 511..

the Trinity cut the Bible in half and made Jesus the exponent of a non-equivalent creed, i.e. the creed about the Triune God. The same game of words is being played when N.T. Wright (currently famous Bishop of Durham) breaks the equivalency between Jesus' unitarian creed and the Christian creed. Paul never ever imagined another creed, another definition of God! "To *us* there is [in comparison with pagan polytheistic systems] One God, the Father and no God besides Him" (see I Cor. 8:4-6). He then adds this: that we recognize "one Lord Jesus Messiah"! N.T. Wright proposes to tell us that this ONE LORD MESSIAH is equivalent to ONE LORD GOD. That Jesus has been added to an *expanded* Shema! This is to snap the chain of equivalency which unites Paul to Jesus and Jesus to the OT Hebrew Bible. Wright attempts a new unbiblical equivalency, i.e. he tries to make Paul into an incipient Trinitarian. He says that the *Shema* is now divided between One God, the Father and one Lord Messiah. But this is precisely not what Paul intended. Jesus is the one Lord *Messiah* just as the shepherds had so boldly declared in Luke 2:11 (calling him the Lord Messiah). And as the whole of the NT states again and again. And Psalm 110:1 so beautifully distinguishes between Yahweh and "my lord" (*adoni*), the Messiah.

Did Paul believe in the mystery or mysteries or the Kingdom? Yes, indeed. He had not abandoned the Gospel as Jesus preached it, about the Kingdom of God and its mysteries. Paul called himself and Apollos "stewards of the mysteries of God" and Paul knew about the mystery of the Gospel in Romans 16:25. One of the greatest assaults on the unity of the NT and of Christianity came and comes in the form of "ultra-dispensationalism" which incredibly posits that the real Gospel was only revealed to Paul in the latter part of his ministry. Paul actually said that his Gospel was revealed to the apostles (plural, Eph. 3:5), not to himself late in life, making him virtually the upstart founder of the Christian faith (as the Bullinger Bible so wrongly does, telling us that there are five different Gospel messages!)

Paul was a "Jesus-Kingdom-Gospel" man to the core (the 8 Acts Kingdom texts also prove this beyond any doubt). Had he not been, he would have been in violation of the Great Commission and under his own curse for preaching "another gospel." In Colossians 1:6 Paul proves the equivalent status of his Gospel with that of Jesus. He speaks, echoing the parable of the sower, of the word of the Gospel "bearing fruit and growing [cp. Jesus in Mark 4:8] from the day you heard it." That is exactly Jesus' point. You have to hear the word of the Kingdom and when held persistently in the face of all difficulties and opposition from Satan who hates that Kingdom message (Luke 8:12), it bears fruit. This is the fruit of the word, which is the same as the fruit of the spirit, since the tool of the spirit is the word of God, the Gospel (Eph. 6:17). In I Thessalonians 1:6 and 2:13 Paul uses the shorthand "word" meaning the Gospel of the Kingdom and speaks of his converts as Jesus did of his, as receiving the word with joy of the holy spirit. Paul shows that the Gospel, when assimilated, is like a battery pack of energy strapped to the back. "You received the word which is an energy at work (*energeitai*) in you who believe it" (I Thess. 2:13). Believing the Gospel as Jesus preached it unleashes power and energy.

"The prominence and space given to the parable of the sower in all three synoptic gospels may be a measure of its perceived importance for the evangelists and for the church at large," remarks Dr. David Wenham.¹¹

Contemporary Equivalency: When Leading Scholars Begin to Sound like the Bible

And the same David Wenham happily says something else in the same book which leads me to a brief account of the major scholars supporting the Abrahamic insights and justifying the past 150 years of struggle. Also I think encouraging us not to concede one inch to the opposite camp in Christology and the definition of the Gospel.

Wenham says: "Traditional Christian orthodoxy is that Jesus is the Son of God, the second member of the Trinity. Whether he saw himself as Son of God in any sense, let alone in any Trinitarian sense is highly debatable. The phrase itself does not necessarily suggest divinity, either in Judaism or in early Christianity" (p. 112). Note how the scholar gives with one hand and takes away with the other. "Whether he saw himself as *Son of God* in any sense..." (If he didn't the rock foundation of the Church on him as Messiah, Son of God, is shattered!). But Wenham knows that Jesus said nothing about being *God the Son*.

¹¹Paul, *Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity*, Eerdmans, 1995, p. 88.

Professing the Jesus who is Equivalent to the Actual Jesus of History

Professor Loofs,¹² writing his history of dogma in 1895 (still not translated into English), spells out in detail the fateful move from Jesus as Messiah to “Jesus” as God the Son. It was the philosophically minded apologists (Aristides, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Theophilus) who invented a pre-history for Jesus, tacked on a preexistence to his existence, made two existences, and thus two different Jesuses — cutting Jesus in half, or doubling him. The Church is now saddled with this giant ecclesiastical blunder caused by forgetting the Hebrew Bible and redefining the faith in terms of Greek cosmology and philosophy. Loofs has brilliantly described the downhill path from the apocalyptic Kingdom Jesus to a strange hybrid figure supposed to be 100% God and 100% man. Would you believe it? The Church theologians then argued for centuries about this invented Jesus. Tossed him around like some rag doll, using hair-splitting and fearfully complex terminology to define “their Jesus.” No doubt it kept them in business, but what did it do for the average layman who needed to know that Jesus was the ultimate human being, the second Adam, God’s final prophet, man in perfect relation to God, his Father?

The Church of God is not alone in complaining about that Trinitarian Jesus of the standard creeds. Hans Küng observed in *On Being a Christian*: “Neither Ignatius nor any of the later Christian writers wanted to give up Jewish monotheism. Bitheism and tritheism were always rejected in principle. But the more Jesus was placed on one level of being with the Father and the more this was described in ‘essential’ categories, so many more difficulties were created in the way of reconciling, conceptually, *monotheism* and *divine sonship, the distinction [of the Son] from God and unity with God*...This development involved almost insurmountable difficulties, and in practice complete failure for the mission and preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ among Jews and many centuries later among the Muslims. People had largely adapted themselves to the Hellenistic ways of thought and lifestyle, as determined by the schools of philosophy, the mystery cults and the Roman state. Philosophical terms became increasingly precise, differences between the schools more delicate, explanations more complicated, dogmas — now in the form of state laws — to protect orthodoxy more numerous. But misunderstandings, factions, and even schisms also became more numerous. Even the great councils of the post-Constantinian era could only partially overcome them” (p. 441).

Küng has the solution: “The *true man* Jesus of Nazareth is for faith the real revelation of the one *true* God” (p. 444). Then he says: “Preexistence of the Son...is a thought that is particularly hard to grasp today...There is in the whole NT... no teaching about one God in three Persons (ways of being), no teaching about a three-one God.”¹³ “Since neither the Jesus of history...announced his own preexistence nor did the Jewish Christian community produce a Trinity, where did this Trinity teaching come from, actually? Answer: It is the product of a great paradigm shift from the original apocalyptic paradigm to the Hellenistic, old church paradigm, the result of the ‘hellenization of Christology.’” This tectonic shift amounted to an “alienation process.” Küng tries his best to approve the Council of Nicea, but admits: “It is unarguable that the Council remained trapped in concepts, ideas and ways of thinking which would have been totally foreign to the Jew Jesus of Nazareth and the original community...Through the councils of Nicea and Chalcedon we were placed at a great distance from the New Testament.”¹⁴

Küng elsewhere describes how the Catholic Church went wild with its speculation about Mary, how she was a virgin after bearing Jesus and remained a virgin all her life. They did not hesitate to use *Da Vinci Code*-like apocryphal “gospels” to promote their fantasies.

But then note how Küng fails to believe the words of Gabriel to Mary. Gabriel explains what the title “Son of God” means. “Precisely because of the begetting by the Father in Mary, he will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). For that reason and no other. Now Küng: First he acknowledges what Gabriel says: “It is clear that this explanation [‘for this reason precisely he will be called Son of God’] provides a

¹²For his amazingly revealing account of how the faith went wrong, see App. 1 to this paper.

¹³ *Christianity*, p. 127.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 224, 237.

reason for the application to Jesus of the title Son of God.”¹⁵ Then he rejects Gabriel: “The virgin birth, attested only in the pre-histories of Matthew and Luke, does not belong to the center of the Gospel... The Christian message can be proclaimed even without these theological legends which are marginal to the NT. Jesus’ divine Sonship is *not* dependent on the virgin birth. He is God’s Son, not because God instead of a man effected his origin, but because he is chosen and destined as God’s Son.”¹⁶

Dr. Chuck Swindoll does no better. He has this to say about the Son of God: “When the title Son of God is used of Christ, *it has nothing to do with this birth to Mary*. As the Son of God he was not born: he was given. Isa. 9:6: ‘For a child will be born to us, a son will be given.’ The term Son of God refers to Jesus’ *eternal* relationship with the Father.”¹⁷

Are we not shocked and appalled that as early as the second century Justin Martyr was putting out the idea that the Son of God engineered his own conception in Mary;¹⁸ that he was alive, acting and well, appearing in person, long before he was born! “Neither Abraham, Isaac or Jacob nor any other man saw the Father, the ineffable Lord of all and of Christ, but they saw him who was according to His will, His SON, being God and an Angel, because he ministered to His will; whom it pleased Him to be born a man through the Virgin; who also was the fire when he conversed with Moses from the bush.”¹⁹ And Theophilus also promotes a pre-human and therefore essentially non-human Jesus: “God’s word, through whom God made all things, being His power and His wisdom, assuming the Person of the Father and Lord of all, went into the paradise Garden...and conversed with Adam, who heard his voice. But what else is this voice but the Word of God, who is also His Son?”²⁰

What would Jesus have said to Peter if Peter had replied to the question “Who do you say I am?” by saying, “The Son of God who showed up in Eden and spoke to Adam.” I doubt if Peter would have graduated from the Messianic school. He would have been guilty of promoting another Jesus.

Is it really impossible for us to do some kindly whistle-blowing, when Chuck Swindoll speaks without batting an eyelid about “angels watching as Mary changed God’s diapers.” Dr. Swindoll is Chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary.

Is that the best that “the system” can do? Is this not to make the faith a laughing stock of Jews and Muslims and skeptics generally? Is the public really impressed by Billy Graham’s dictum that “in heaven we are going to polish rainbows, tend heavenly gardens and prepare heavenly dishes”? (Paul said we are going to fix the world, with Jesus.) Is not that dictum about polishing rainbows enough to keep those 98% of Londoners permanently out of church? Has not the situation reached an unbearable rock bottom when the Bishop of St. Edmundsbury recently rebuked an innocent writer who urged the clergy to take a clear stand against homosexuality. The bishop replied to the man who clearly had the Bible on his side: “I received your letter of the 23rd Jan. and I am sorry that your experience of life is so narrow that it leads you to write such rubbish. You make the most appalling assumptions about people who just happen to be homosexuals, on the basis of your deeply inbuilt, destructive prejudice. [The poor man was only quoting the Bible!] To then support your mindless assertions by reference to the Bible merely exacerbates the insupportable. The only sensible thing in your letter was the final quotation, ‘you shall know them by their fruits.’ How true, the smell of rotten fruit in your letter was overwhelming.”

So what are we going to do about this? First be immensely encouraged by the new books and websites appearing as support for the central truths of the Bible about Jesus and the Gospel. With Dr. Colin Brown, seasoned systematician at Fuller (no less) saying: “To be called Son of God in the Bible means you are not God,” and “To read John 1:1 as if it said ‘in the beginning was the Son’ is patently wrong”²¹ can we not proceed with confidence? James Dunn, the most celebrated Christologist of our time,

¹⁵ *On Being a Christian*, p. 456.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Swindoll and Zuck, *Understanding Christian Theology*, 2003, p. 570.

¹⁸ *Apologia*, 1, 33.

¹⁹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 127.

²⁰ Theophilus, *To Autolytus*, Bk. 2, 22.

²¹ “Trinity and Incarnation: In Search of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Ex Auditu*, 7, 1991.

was personally interviewed by our own Dan Mages, Mark Ideta and Lee Greer. It is clear that he has given up belief in preexistence, even in John. He is persuaded of our understanding that Jesus is what the word became, not the preexisting God the Son of orthodoxy.²² If these leading men are coming to the conclusions equivalent to those of the unitarians who struggled manfully against the odds to promote the real human Jesus, can we do any less? Could we not follow the example of Paul who lobbied people for truth by going into the *agora* or marketplace of his day? Would not the equivalent today be the internet? Is this not God's gift to us for preaching the Kingdom of God worldwide? ("and then the end will come," Matt. 24:14).

Professor Bart Ehrman gives us just the encouragement to action we need. "Already by the end of the first century, Christians in some circles proclaimed that Jesus was himself divine, that he existed prior to his birth, that he created the world and all that is in it...This is a far cry from the humble beginnings of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet...The concerns which drove [the early debates about who Jesus is] were far removed from the concerns of Jesus himself...One of the strands of Christianity which has been consistently marginalized throughout the course of the past 1900 years has been one which took the authentic words of Jesus seriously...The historical Jesus did not teach about his own Divinity or pass on to his disciples the doctrines which later came to be embodied in the Nicene Creed. His concerns were those of a first-century Jewish apocalypticist...What is clear is that the apocalyptic Jesus we've uncovered is a far cry from the Jesus many people in our society today know."²³

We can take as our basis the remarkable conclusion of Adolf Harnack, prince of Church historians. "Jesus is the beginning, purpose and principle of the creation. But the Greeks, [wrongly] as a result of their cosmological interest, embraced this thought as a fundamental proposition. The complete Greek Christology then is expressed as follows: 'Christ who saved us, being first spirit and the beginning of all creation became flesh.' That is the fundamental, theological and philosophical creed on which the whole Trinitarian and Christological speculations of the Church of the succeeding centuries are built, and it is thus the root of the orthodox system of dogmatics...With this transition, the theories concerning Christ are removed from the Jewish and OT soil...and transplanted to the Greek one...The appearance of Christ is now an 'assumption of flesh,' and immediately the intricate questions about the connection of the [preexisting] heavenly and spiritual being with the flesh simultaneously arise...But the flesh...was reckoned as something unsuitable for Christ and foreign to him as a spiritual being. 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...The logos was also transformed into a cosmic force and thereby secularized." (It was no longer the Gospel of the Kingdom, the saving seed facilitating immortality and a place in the Kingdom.)

I think the gift of the Abrahamic understandings about God, Jesus and the Gospel of the Kingdom need to be thoroughly instilled in all church members so that each can become an army of one, as well as part of a team, equipped to talk to others about what they have learned. This will entail teaching about how we differ from the "system," how this arose, and how important it is. How men such as Servetus gave his life literally for these truths.²⁴

It is all too easy for church to become a routine in which the church is comforted week by week, but never really becomes a power for changing the world, leavening society one person at a time. We cite the passage in Ephesians about the work of pastor-teachers being to equip the saints for the work of ministry, but does this really happen? If Paul exhorted the Corinthians to be "always abounding in the work of the Lord," and if he was encouraged when in prison that his church members had become courageous proponents of the faith (Phil. 1:14), is not that the ideal which Paul hoped for the church at all times?

²²His *Christology in the Making* (second edition) is a wonderful confirmation of the COG's stand on who Jesus is.

²³*Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, OUP, 1999.

²⁴For a very informative as well as gut-wrenching account of his tragic death at the hands of Calvin, please read *Out of the Flames* by Laurence and Nancy Goldstone and of course Prof. Marian Hillar's *Michael Servetus, Intellectual Giant, Humanist and Martyr* (Univ. Press of America, 2002). Also his *The Case of Michael Servetus (1511-1533)—the Turning Point in the Struggle for Freedom of Conscience* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1997).

Three remarkable equivalencies seem to point to one urgent task, and a costly one: In Mark 10:29, 30 Jesus said, “Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the **sake of the Gospel**, who will not get a hundred times as much now in this time, houses, and brothers, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and land — though with great troubles; and, in the age to come, eternal life.” Now notice how Matthew reported that saying: “And everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or property, **for my sake**, will receive a hundred times as much in return and will have eternal life” (Matt. 19:29).

Luke thinks of commitment to the Kingdom of God, which is the same idea in different words: “And he said to them, ‘Truly I say to you, there is no man who has given up house or wife or brothers or father or mother or children, **because of the Kingdom of God**, who will not get much more in this time, and in the age to come, eternal life’” (Luke 18:29, 30).

To give all to Jesus is to give our finest effort towards his Gospel of the Kingdom.

Appendix 1

How the Faith Went Wrong

Comments from Dr. Friedrich Loofs (1858-1928), Prof. of Church History, University of Halle, Germany

Professor Loofs described the process of the early corruption of biblical Christianity:

“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 fourth 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 [i.e., of a preexistent Son]. 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, section 18: “Christianity as a Revealed Philosophy. The Greek Apologists,” Niemeyer Verlag, 1951, p. 97, translation mine).

“Polytheism entered the faith camouflaged.”

“The criticism of orthodox Christology is not the property of a few people only. To a certain extent it may be considered as generally recognized by the whole German Protestant theology of the present time...At present [1911] I do not know of a single professor of evangelical theology in Germany [who thinks it right to reproduce the old orthodox formulas]. All learned Protestant theologians of Germany...really admit unanimously that the orthodox Christology does not do sufficient justice to the truly human life of Jesus and that the orthodox doctrine of the ‘two natures’ in Christ cannot be retained in its traditional form” (Loofs, lecturing in Ohio in 1911. *What Is the Truth about Jesus Christ?* p. 202).

For further reading: Willibald Beyschlag (1823-1900), evangelical theologian, professor at Halle, *Neutestamentliche Theologie*, trans. into English, 1895.

Appendix II

Quotes from a Catholic Scholar

The following quotations are from *Born Before All Time? The Dispute over Christ's Origin* by German Catholic scholar Karl-Josef Kuschel, foreword by Hans Küng (NY: Crossroad).

On Philippians 2:6-11: “Present-day exegetes have drawn the radically opposite conclusion that the Philippians hymn **does not speak of the pre-existence of Christ at all**. Indeed, an increasing number of present-day New Testament scholars with good reason question the premises of exegesis hitherto and cannot see pre-existence, let alone Incarnation, in the Philippian hymn” (p. 250).

Quoting Catholic scholar Jerome Murphy-O’Connor: “As the Righteous Man par excellence Christ was the perfect image (*eikon*) of God. He was totally what God intended man to be. His sinless condition gave him the right to be treated as if he were God, that is, to enjoy the incorruptibility in which Adam was created. This right, however, he did not use to his own advantage, but he gave himself over to the consequences of a mode of existence that was not his by accepting the condition of a slave which involved suffering and death” (p. 252).

Kuschel: “The sources are neither wisdom reflections on the righteous sufferer nor mythological speculations about a pre-existent divine being, but the messiology of the book of Isaiah [ch. 53]. So vv. 6 and 7 would not be speaking of a pre-existent heavenly being or of Incarnation, but solely of the life of Christ on earth” (p. 254).

Quoting the modern Protestant exegete Matthias Rissi in a 1987 article: “He is the man Jesus who was exalted because he humbled himself, and at the end will receive eschatological homage from all. This is clearly a Jewish-Christian interpretation of the career of Christ on the basis of a Christological interpretation of the Old Testament” (p. 254).

Kuschel quotes from another Protestant exegete, a German named Klaus Berger: “The conclusion is that ‘from this sequence it follows that Phil. 2:6 is primarily concerned with making statements about high status and by no means necessarily concerned with pre-existence. I do not think that it can be proved that this is a statement about Incarnation.’”

Kuschel: “The Jewish background is enough for understanding this hymn and indeed for providing continuity with Aramaic Jewish Christianity in the proclamation of Christ. So ‘humbling himself,’ ‘emptying himself,’ is **not** to be understood as the act of a mythological **pre-existent** heavenly being, but as a qualification of the man Jesus... What does all this mean for the question of the pre-existence of Christ? To sum up, we can now say that if we take note of the linguistic subtleties, the dynamic of inner movement and the poetic form of the text, **this hymn does not contain what numerous interpreters seek and find in it: an independent statement about pre-existence or even a Christology of pre-existence...**In 1977 the Freiburg exegete Anton Vögtle also came to a similarly sober conclusion: ‘**No pre-existence of Christ before the world with an independent significance can be recognized even in Phil. 2**’” (p. 254, 262).

On Galatians 4:4: “Dunn’s conclusion is: ‘Paul and his readers in writing and reading these words may well have thought only of the man Jesus whose ministry in Palestine was of **divine commissioning** and whose uniquely intimate relation with God was proved (and enhanced) by his resurrection, despite his rejection by the stewards of Israel’s heritage’” (p. 274).

On the phrase “God sent forth His Son,” quoting Bas van Iersel in a 1982 article: “Does he send him from heaven? This is not mentioned even once, in contrast to what Wisdom 9:10 says about wisdom. There is no mention either of this son having previously been with God — as is the case with wisdom in Wisdom 9:9. **On the contrary, the son who is sent was born under the law**, i.e. at a moment when the Torah was already in force, and he was born from a woman (Gal. 4:4), and he is sent when the fullness of time comes. What Paul writes about **the sending of the Son can in no way be understood of a situation preceding the beginning of history, but rather of an event following Jesus’ birth and preceding his resurrection**” (p. 275).

Kuschel: “**For the apostle, this statement evidently does not presuppose the belief that the one who was sent had a real prior existence with God, was a ‘divine being.’** But Paul is quite firmly convinced that the significance of this concrete historical Jesus can never be understood as anything but that he is **Son of God — from the beginning of his earthly activity**” (p. 277).

On whether Paul in Romans 9:5 calls Jesus God, quoting Catholic NT scholar Otto Kuss: “The question whether Paul directly and explicitly described Jesus as ‘God’ (*theos*) must in all probability be answered in the negative... For him (Paul), in contrast to us, **‘God’ always sounds (to put it in**

contemporary language) like **God the Father**, in which case the statement ‘Christ is God’ would be simply impossible” (p. 303).

“The interpretation of Bas van Iersel may be correct here: **‘But of pre-existence and equality of being with God we cannot discover any trace in Paul’s letters’**” (p. 304).

“Paul’s authentic Christology **does not recognize any independent statements about a being of Jesus Christ before the world or before time (in direct statements either about ‘being with God’ before appearing on earth or about his own mediation at creation, or even identifying him with God)**...For Paul, Christ is not a divine heavenly being in the Gnostic mythological sense; he is not a pre-existent divine being who left the heavenly world once again to ascend to God in heaven — as was assumed by Bultmann’s interpretation of Paul” (p. 306, 307).

“As for Paul, so too for Matthew, Jesus is the wisdom of God as a human person and is not as pre-existent as hypostatized wisdom. He is — to put it briefly — ‘wisdom become flesh,’ which has to suffer the fate of persecution...**It is Jesus’ being begotten by the Spirit of God in the womb which is the foundation for his divine Sonship in Matthew and Luke**...Nowhere does [Matthew] attribute to Jesus a saying about heavenly origin or even his real pre-existence, nor does he allow any of the followers of Jesus make such a claim” (p. 317, 319).

In 1954, “Hans Conzelmann had arrived at the view that **in the title ‘Son of God’ in Luke there was ‘no idea of a physical divine nature.’ That was already evident from the fact that ‘the idea of pre-existence is completely lacking’**...The Catholic exegetes Gerhard Schneider and Joseph Fitzmeyer agree in arriving at the conclusion that Luke in fact does not think ‘in terms of a pre-existence of Christ’ (G. Schneider). Fitzmeyer adds: ‘In Lukan theology there is no question of Jesus’ pre-existence or Incarnation’” (p. 320).

“Both Matthew and Luke clearly wanted to stress — while at the same time repudiating both adoptionist ideas and ideas governed by a pre-existence Christology — that Jesus Christ did not just ‘become’ Son of God from a particular age, nor was he Son of God ‘from eternity’; **he was Son of God from his birth**” (p. 321).

“Hans Conzelmann has convincingly stated that Luke ‘remains with the Christology of the Synoptic tradition, **which does not know any pre-existence**’” (p. 323).

Quoting Raymond Brown: “It must have been the pre-existence of Jesus and his heavenly origin which had been lacking in the Christology of the ‘Apostolic Christians’...Both Apostolic and Johannine Christians say that Jesus is God’s Son; yet Johannine Christians have come to understand that this means that he is ever at the Father’s side (1:18), not belonging to this world (17:14), but to a heavenly world above (3:13, 31). Once again Christology I attribute to the Apostolic Christians is not a pure hypothesis based on an interpretative reading of the Fourth Gospel. **From the Gospels of Matthew and Luke we know of late-first-century Christians who acknowledged Jesus as Son of God through conception without a human father; but in whose high Christology there is no hint of pre-existence.** They know a Jesus who is king, lord and Saviour from the moment of his birth at Bethlehem, but not a Jesus who says, ‘Before Abraham even came into existence, I AM’” (p. 377).

On John 1: “From this it may be concluded that he [Jesus] is the Logos in person, the wisdom of God in human form...What Rudolf Bultmann concluded may still be valid today: ‘Jesus is **not presented in literal seriousness as a pre-existent divine being who came in human form to earth to reveal unprecedented secrets.** Rather, the mythological terminology is intended to express the absolute and decisive significance of his word’...So John is not concerned with the epiphany of a divine being, but with the incarnation of the Word of God himself; not with the miraculous formation of a divine being among us, but with the manifestation of God in a historical human being” (p. 382, 383).

“Jesus did not proclaim himself ‘God,’ but rather was understood by the community after Easter, in ‘the spirit,’ as the word of God in person....Secondly, the disciples of Jesus did not claim that Jesus was God either; they, too, did not deify their hero” (p. 387).