

Discerning the Difference Between Two Opposed Theologies

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My experience with the Bible over these many years, and extensive exposure via internet and email correspondence to the troublesome issues that currently divide and fragment believers, teach me this: Distorted versions of the faith provide subtle, insidious opposition to biblical truth. I want to take these minutes 1) to confirm the extraordinarily valuable insights of Abrahamic people, certainly not to induce a sense of complacency, but to keep us all alert to the task we have been given; 2) to expose the systematic mistakes which seem to underlie so much popular theology, which is driven by theological leadership in high places. I will deal with the two major centers of interest: Who is the real Jesus and what is the real Gospel? In other words, what is the real Christianity and what is the authentic way to salvation and immortality?

To make my point as vividly as possible I propose to quote briefly from the standard work which represents “evangelicalism,” especially in the USA. I will let evangelicalism tell its own story in its own words, and these words will come from Dr. Charles Swindoll’s and Roy Zuck’s 1500-page tome *Understanding Christian Theology*.¹ What they write underlies the thinking, conscious or unconscious, of millions of those who enter church Sunday by Sunday.

Obviously I must not unfairly “lead” you as witnesses to agree with my reactions to what I read, because you are the ones to judge, remembering of course that we all have the duty to be teaching (“in view of the time you ought to be teachers,” Heb. 5:12) in some capacity the way to real salvation through the real God and the real Jesus. And those who make some claim to be teachers in a more formal sense receive a tougher judgment (James 3:1). We cannot afford *not* to be properly informed, and this takes constant study and meditation. The virgins who had lamps but not oil, or at least who ran out of oil, seem to be those who, though equipped with the Gospel of the Kingdom (the “lamp,” as Jesus earlier defined it, Luke 8:16), nevertheless did not have *active, working* lamps. They had run out of oil or perhaps we might say “they had run out of steam.” They had become inactive Christians (someone spoke of “the yawning church”), a dangerous place to be in view of the stringent requirements laid on us by Jesus who spoke of the need to give out in the same measure as we have received (Mark 4:24). I remember, too, that Jesus said to the young man, “Let the dead bury the dead, but you get out there and preach the Gospel of the Kingdom everywhere” (Luke 9:60). I wonder if we have become desensitized to the urgency of Jesus’ words.

The Evangelical Version of Jesus

So here is what the top men in the evangelical world are saying about Jesus. The discussion is about the Angel of the Lord:

The evidence seems to support overwhelmingly [the view that] the Angel of the Lord was none other than the preincarnate Son of God. If this can be established, it means that centuries before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, He walked on earth, manifesting Himself as a ministering angel. True, the New Testament nowhere states that Jesus of Nazareth was the Angel of the Lord of Old Testament times. Yet many things point to that conclusion (p. 570).

Note now how that conclusion is reached:

Christ is the eternal Son of God. Christ has existed eternally as the Son of God. *Though no specific verse states this truth precisely that way*, the evidence pointing in that direction is overwhelming. Whenever the title is used of Him [i.e. Son of God], it speaks of His divine essence. His fierce critics, the Jewish religious leaders, did not fail to make the connection between His repeated claims that God was His Father and His claim for deity, that He is equal with God the Father (John 5:18; 10:30-48; 20:28-31). *When the title “Son of God” is used of Christ, it has nothing to do with His birth to Mary* (p. 570).

¹ Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003.

Has he read Luke 1:35 where Luke presents the hero of his amazing two-volume work as Son of God precisely *because of (dio kai)* his virginal begetting?! Now Swindoll again:

As the Son of God he was not born; He was given. That is precisely what the prophet Isaiah said of Him. “For a child will be born to us, a son will be *given* to us” (Isa. 9:6). The term “Son of God” refers to Christ’s eternal relationship to the Father. He was born as a child, to Mary... At the time of creation the Son of God already existed. In fact, He had a vital part in it (Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 1:2). Christ, the Son of God, is described as being in the Father’s bosom (John 1:18; 1 John 1:1-3). Thus the Son of God is as eternal as God the Father. Also the fact that God the Father sent the Son into the world (Isa 9:6; John 3:16; 10:21; Rom. 8:32; Gal. 4:4; 1 John 4:10, 14) points to Jesus’ preexistence. The terms *firstborn* and *only begotten* describe Christ’s eternal relationship to the Father. “Firstborn” speaks of Christ’s priority, preeminence, dignity, rank and position as the Son of God, and “only begotten” describes Christ’s uniqueness. He is the only-one-of-a-kind Son of God.

John F. Walvoord gives an excellent summary of the biblical teaching on Christ’s eternal sonship. [But his appeal is to the creeds.] “The scriptural view of the Sonship of Christ as recognized in many of the great creeds of the church is that Christ was always the Son of God by eternal generation and that He took upon Himself humanity through generation of the Holy Spirit; the human birth was not in order to become a Son of God but because He was the Son of God.” Therefore, since He existed from eternity, it should be no surprise that Christ appeared in the Old Testament (pp. 570-71).

What Is the Saving Christian Gospel According to Evangelicals?

Now we turn to the all-important matter of getting the definition of the saving Gospel right. Nothing can be more disastrous, Paul said, than adding to or subtracting from the Gospel (Gal. 1:6-9). Distorted gospels called forth Paul’s most powerful words of condemnation. If a depleted Gospel is presented, we offer people salvation on a false basis and so trick them into not being saved when they think that are being saved. This leads to the shattering disappointment spoken of by Jesus in Matthew 7:21-23. So what does evangelicalism have to say on this subject?

From the same evangelical quarter we have this from their section on “What is the Gospel?” This question really amounts to “what is Christianity?” or “how do we achieve salvation?” We read this:

The word “gospel” (*evangelion*) means “good news.” It is sometimes used in a nonreligious sense, as in 1 Thessalonians 3:6: “But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love...” But the major use of *evangelion* is with a religious connotation. But when used in this way, what was the good news about? The New Testament uses the word in **two ways**: “of the good tidings of the kingdom of God and of salvation through Christ.”² In the Gospels is used by only Matthew and Mark and, in all but one instance, Matthew wrote of *evangelion* as “the gospel of the kingdom,” which the prophets foretold and Jesus preached (Matt. 4:23; 9:35). This was also the message of John the Baptist (3:1) and of the twelve apostles when they were first sent out by our Lord (10:5-7). His covenant people, Israel, refused to repent and meet the spiritual conditions of the kingdom, and they rejected Christ as king at his first coming (Matt. 11-12; John 1:11). But at the end of the yet-future seven-year Tribulation (Dan. 12:1), Christ will again return to earth and present himself to Israel as both Messiah and King. Even at the end of his ministry, therefore, when Jesus warned of the coming terrible destruction in the “great tribulation,” he announced that “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world” (Matt 24:14) (pp. 867-68).

Then he segues into evangelicalism, his own definition of the Gospel, by referring to Mary’s anointing of Christ for his coming *death and burial*, and says that this event “introduces the theme that is predominant in the Epistles, and especially the Pauline writings.” Watch how the Gospel of Jesus about the Kingdom is about to slip away.

² Citing the Greek *Lexicon of Abbott and Smith*, p. 184.

Without further comment, he asks:

What was the *content* of the good news that *especially Paul* was commissioned to present? [Note the unnoticed loss of Jesus and *his* Gospel!] He stated this clearly in 1 Corinthians 15:1, 3-5 [the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus]. Paul...was “separated to the gospel of God,...concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 1:1-3). At the end of his third missionary journey Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus that his ministry was “to testify to the gospel [*evangelion*] of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24).

Do you see what has happened here? I want to sound the alert! The Gospel has been cut into two. First the author has twisted the lexicon’s definition of the Gospel: The lexicon said that the Gospel was “the good tidings of the Kingdom of God and of salvation through Christ.” The lexicon of course intended this definition³ as a single whole, the Kingdom of God being included in salvation through Jesus. But the evangelicals spoke of “two ways” of salvation.

Against this very unfair treatment of the Gospel the Abrahamic movement was founded in the 1850s. We need constantly to be reminded of this fundamental fact, lest we lose a sense of identity, which as we all know is a sign of complete collapse.

Evangelicalism made the point that Paul summarized his career as one of “preaching the Gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24). But astonishingly the writer did not bother or care to give you the next verse. There Paul *defines the content* of the *Gospel of grace as identical with the preaching of the Kingdom of God*. It is that verse which ought to shake the evangelical system at its foundation and lead to the realization that their Gospel teaching, though not expressing it this way, says in effect: “Don’t listen to Jesus for your Gospel; listen to Paul.” I suggest that this is the disaster against which Jesus warned over and over again. “He who believes my word(s)...” “He who is ashamed of me and my words, my Gospel” (see Mark 8:35-38) is going to be terribly disappointed when I return. And 2 John 7-9: Whoever does not bring the teaching of Christ is to be rejected as dangerous. Equally emphatically from Paul: “If anyone does not bring the health-giving words of our Lord Jesus Christ...” Paul goes on to condemn such persons as ignorant and dangerous (1 Tim. 6:3-4).

Evangelicalism goes on to fire warning salvos against anyone who would dare to add to the simple Gospel that Jesus *died and rose*. I fear that they are warning us against listening carefully to Jesus and his Gospel of the Kingdom (of course they will also make it quite clear that without the Trinity, anything we say will be automatically flawed). Evangelicalism is a formidable foe.

Again, do you see what has happened here? You are supposed to gather from the evangelical quarter that the Gospel of the Kingdom was preached by Jesus *only to Jews* and is not for us now. The idea is that Israel refused that Gospel of the Kingdom, and so God then adopted Plan B by going to the Gentiles with the Gospel of grace (Jesus died and rose). That Gospel of the grace of God they carefully do not call “another Gospel” but “another *form* of the same Gospel”⁴ — a phrase which leaves the brain in a fog.

This technique is like the title on the Book of Mormon: “Another Gospel of Jesus Christ.” Or is it a “Gospel of another Jesus Christ”?

I think this evangelical account of Christianity is systematically mistaken. First of all Israel did not entirely refuse the Gospel of the Kingdom. Jesus found 12 good men and many more, including wonderfully faithful women (many of whom helped the mission out of their own resources), who did indeed repent by responding to Jesus’ Gospel about the Kingdom (Mark 1:14-15). These were the Apostles who *are* (not just were) the foundation of the Church. Their Kingdom Gospel is the Gospel as Jesus preached it and to remove it from the Church is to blast away at the foundation of the faith. Not to define the Gospel *as Jesus defined it* is to attach oneself to another Jesus, the very thing which Jesus and Paul warned against. Jesus without his Gospel is not really Jesus. Jesus without the Gospel of the Kingdom which drove his mission (Luke 4:43) is a Jesus floating free of his own words and his Great Commission, in which he commanded his followers to take his own Gospel of the Kingdom, the very same Gospel as he had offered to Jews, to the whole world — and to go on doing it uninterruptedly until

³Webster’s dictionary provides a much more accurate definition of the Gospel than do evangelicals.

⁴*Unger’s Dictionary*, under “Gospel.”

the end of the age. We see Paul doing just that in Acts 19:8 (arguing and persuading from Scripture), 20:24, 25 and 28: 23, 30-31. In that last verse Paul is seen “welcoming the people and speaking about the Kingdom.” Is this some novel Gospel of Paul? Hardly. Jesus was the model for Paul’s tireless activity. Jesus likewise “welcomed the people and began speaking about the Kingdom of God” (Luke 9:11). Is not Luke taking his stand against this amazingly confusing Gospel system of modern evangelicalism?

F.F. Bruce to the Rescue

The evangelical cutting of the Gospel in two and then losing half of it has deceived a lot of churchgoers. I discovered very recently that F.F. Bruce, who was gracious enough to correspond with me on these great topics many years ago, was hot on the trail of the evangelical confusion over the Gospel and did his best to expose it:

Bruce: The Gospel to be Preached

“Make disciples of all the nations,” said the Lord. The paraphrase in the Marcan appendix makes it clear how this was to be done. “And He said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). By obeying this command, the disciples would fulfill His own prophecy: “the gospel must first be preached unto all the nations” (Mark 13:10), or, in the amplified form of Matthew 24:14: “**this gospel of the kingdom** shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come.” No reasonable exegesis can divorce these sayings from one another. And the apostles proceeded to “make disciples of all the nations” by preaching this Gospel [of the Kingdom] to them. According to the Acts, Philip in Samaria preached “good tidings concerning the kingdom of God” (8:12), Paul at Ephesus reasoned persuasively “as to the things concerning the Kingdom of God” (19:8), or, as he said himself in 20:25, “went about preaching the kingdom,” while later at Rome he expounded the Gospel to the Jews, “testifying the Kingdom of God” (28:23), and in his lodging “received all that went in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God” (28:30ff.). A comparison of verses 24 and 25 of Acts 20 shows that “to testify the gospel of the grace of God” **refers to the same activity as “preaching the kingdom.”** In the light of these and other scriptures, it is difficult to accept a certain brand of “dispensational” teaching, which makes a *clear-cut distinction between the Gospel of the Kingdom and the Gospel of the grace of God*. The only good news that God has to offer men is of salvation by His grace alone, to be received through faith in Christ alone. By the new birth which accompanies the acceptance of this salvation, a man enters the **Kingdom** (John 3:3, 5; cf. Matt. 18:3); and so this Gospel is equally the good news of the Kingdom and of the grace of God. Upon the preacher of any other gospel save this one a solemn anathema is pronounced (Gal. 1:8ff).

Yet the *Scofield Bible*, the most popular compendium of this dispensational teaching [i.e. making the Gospel of grace *different from* the Gospel of the Kingdom], tells us that Matthew 24:14 “has specific reference to the proclamation of the good news that the kingdom is again ‘at hand’ by the Jewish remnant.” For illumination, we turn to [Scofield’s] note on Revelation 14:6, where four forms of the Gospel are distinguished: (1) the Gospel of the kingdom, (2) the Gospel of the grace of God, (3) the everlasting Gospel (Rev. 14:6), (4) that which Paul calls “my Gospel” (Rom. 2:16; 16:25). The first of these, we are told, “is the good news that God purposes to set up on the earth, in fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant, . . . a kingdom, political, spiritual, **Israelitish**, universal.” This Gospel was preached, *in the past* by John the Baptist, our Lord and his disciples, *until “the Jewish rejection of the King”*: its preaching will be resumed *in the future*, “during the great tribulation, and immediately preceding the coming of the King in glory.” That is to say, an earthly, restored Davidic kingdom was offered to the Jews, who rejected the offer and crucified the King. Those who teach this seldom face the question, What if they had accepted the offer? If they do, and preserve consistency, they must consent to the conclusion of one of the less orthodox of their number, that “there is no cross in God’s plan of atonement.” That is, had the Jews accepted their King, they would have proceeded at once to the evangelization of the world, which

would have received the promised blessing — without any cross! Fortunately, the great majority of dispensationalists see that such an argument undermines the whole of Christianity, and refuse to go so far...

This earthly kingdom, they tell us, will again be preached by a faithful Jewish remnant, which in the course of a few short years, during a time of unparalleled persecution, will accomplish more in the evangelizing of the world than has been accomplished by the Christian Church in well-nigh 2,000 years. For any plain Scripture giving clear evidence of the evangelistic activity of this Jewish remnant we look in vain. Bruce continued: But the evangelizing of the world, which Christ said must precede the coming of the end, **is not the business of the Church**, we are told. For the divine purpose for this age, we are referred to Acts 15:14, “dispensationally...the most important passage in the N.T.” (*Scofield Bible*). In this verse, James is simply referring to Peter’s account of the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius. By blessing this Roman centurion with His salvation, God “did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His name.” The emphasis is on “Gentiles”— Gentiles, that is, in addition to Jews. James stated nothing new: the Lord had already spoken of “other sheep...not of this fold,” which were to be united with the obedient sheep of the Jewish fold, so that all that heard His voice, both Jews and Gentiles, might together form “one flock” (John 10:16). We must not confound the evangelization of the world with the conversion of the world. It is the Church’s responsibility to evangelize the world by preaching the Gospel to all the nations: to convert all the nations lies beyond her power. To preserve the balance of truth, we must not exalt Acts 15:14 above Matthew 28:18 ff. Dispensationally, i.e., as giving the divine purpose for the present age, our Lord’s commission to his Church is surely at least as important as the words of James, if not more so. It is as the Church fulfills the terms of the commission by preaching the Gospel to the nations that God takes out of them “a people for His name.”

The words, “make disciples of all the nations” (literally ‘disciple all the nations’) cannot mean that nations as nations are to become Christian. Primarily, it is individuals and not communities that are to be converted. There is no such thing as a “social gospel” apart from the redemption of the individual: the fundamental question is “What must *I* do to be saved?” So also, in what is misleadingly called “the judgment of the nations” in Matthew 25:31 ff, those who are gathered as nations are separated and judged as individuals. “He shall separate them” (25:32) is on a par with “baptizing *them*...teaching them” (28:19ff): in each case “them” represents the masculine *autous* [individual persons], not the neuter *αυτα*, which we should have expected had the nations (neuter) been separated as such in the one place or baptized and taught as such in the other. In all nations, as the Gospel is preached in them, there are some who believe, and some who believe not.⁵

Bruce: The Commands to be Taught

As we read the words, “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you,” we naturally think of the Lord’s words recorded in this Gospel — the Sermon on the Mount, the Parables of the Kingdom, all the teaching which shows how those who belong to His Realm should regulate their lives. Surely it is for want of applying these principles to practical life that we — even we who profess and call ourselves Christians — find ourselves in such a desperate impasse to-day. These are the lessons which, if learned and practiced, provide a secure foundation for life, whether of men or nations: where they are neglected, ruin is as certain as to a house which, built on a foundation of sand, is exposed to the rage of wind and wave. But we are reminded that all this body of sublime teaching is not for Christians of this age, but for a hypothetical Jewish remnant of a future day. The standards too high for us to reach in our hours of ease will be attained by them in days of unprecedented trial. And so some of the greatest passages of Holy Writ — the Sermon on the Mount, with the Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer,

⁵ *Evangelical Quarterly*, 12, 1940, p. 206-209.

the Kingdom Parables, the Little Apocalypse — all find their way to the Jewish waste-basket. **There is but one logical consequence the Great Commission must go the same way.** And while most teachers of this school stop short of this consequence, some, clear-sighted and logical, take this step. Thus, for example, the late Sir Robert Anderson, while allowing an “intermediate fulfillment” for the commission in the present age, proceeds to argue “that prophetically the commission belongs to the age when the Church of this dispensation shall have passed to heaven (1 Thess. 4: 16, 17), and when the true remnant of Israel — the ‘all Israel’ of Romans 11:26 (see 9:6, 27), typified by the ‘five hundred brethren’ who gathered round the Lord upon the mountain — shall be the missionaries to the world.”

The logical consequence, certainly; but Euclid had a method of carrying a hypothesis to its logical consequence which is known as the *reductio ad absurdum*; and the reader may well feel that in such an argument as that contained in this last quotation we have the *reductio ad absurdum* of the “dispensational” theory with its “remnant” hypothesis. When the disciples heard the Sermon on the Mount, the Kingdom parables, the apocalyptic discourse of Matthew 24, or the commission which we are considering, did they receive from the Lord the slightest indication that he was then addressing them, *not as representatives of that Church* which he told them he was going to build, but as representatives of a Jewish remnant to arise on a far distant day? And what indication have we, apart from a very precarious hypothesis, proved by no certain warranty of Holy Scripture, that as we in our turn read those wonderful words, we are *not* to apply them to ourselves, but to others of a future day, who while enjoying far fewer privileges than we do, must shoulder far weightier responsibilities than ours? None. And as for the hypothetical remnant, the following description of it reduces it ad absurdum as effectively as words can [Alexander Reese is rightly critical of this theory]:

“the two-headed, two-tongued monstrosity in Israel and Christendom at the End-time — a half-converted, half-Christian Jewish Remnant, which at one and the same time evangelizes the nations and invokes the curses of heaven upon them: which cleaves to the Imprecatory Psalms — and uses the Lord’s Prayer, some of the Beatitudes, and the Missionary Commission of Matthew 28: which knows nothing of present peace, forgiveness and deliverance — and converts untold millions to Christ: which is sealed against death — and has many thousands of ‘martyrs’ who are so fortunate as to enter heaven and attain the highest blessings: which is nebulous in its knowledge of full salvation — and becomes nursing father to the glorious martyrs of Revelation 7.”

Fortunately, if the “remnant” exegesis of Matthew 28 is the logical result of the “remnant” exegesis of the earlier parts of this Gospel, the converse is also true: if the Great Commission was given to the Church (and the Church has never been more worthy of her calling than when acting upon this commission), then the earlier parts of Matthew are also intended for the Church, and are to be taught as part of the “all things” commanded by the Lord.⁶ [Amen!]

Finally Bruce makes our Abrahamic point: **“To distinguish ‘the Gospel of the grace of God’ from what Paul calls ‘my Gospel’ is indeed a tour de force! For Paul’s insistence that he and the other Apostles preached the same Gospel, see 1 Cor. 15:11.”**

All this from Bruce may be a bit of a mouthful. But the substance of Bruce’s excellent insight is the Abrahamic point, the rationale really for a new denomination. **Dispensationalism**, which underlies more or less explicitly the popular form of the Gospel of Christianity, is to be guarded against. The theory proposes that the Gospel as Jesus preached it is *not for us at all*. It was for Jews in the past and will be for Jews in the future after the so-called pre-tribulation rapture! But the pre-trib rapture is itself only another misleading by-product of the dispensationalist scheme! By taking the words of Christ from us and applying them only to Jews, dispensationalism tells the public that the clear words about when the Christians are to be gathered to Jesus — “immediately *after* [post] the tribulation of those days” (Matt 24:29-31) — are not for them! Rather they should listen to Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye and many others

⁶ Ibid., 209-211.

and believe that they will not be on earth during the Great Tribulation. As always in theology one mistake produces another. The whole concept that Christianity is not based on Christ is, I suggest, a national disaster.

Closely allied to the flimsy Gospel of evangelicalism is the related idea that repentance is *a work* and thus not to be included in the Gospel. This theory would of course rule out the Gospel of Jesus for Christians. The entire Christianity of Jesus is neatly summarized by Mark in his brilliant opening statement about the faith. Jesus came heralding God's Gospel about the Kingdom being at hand and commanding: "*Repent and believe the Gospel of the Kingdom*" (Mark 1:14, 15). This is the summation of biblical Christianity and the parable of the sower expands⁷ on that Kingdom Gospel and makes *the seed Gospel Message of the Kingdom the germ of immortality*.

Just as the cells in our body create energy from oxygen and food, our spiritual "cells" are fed and energized by the pure words of Jesus and the Apostles. (But what happens when the spiritual food chain is polluted and deprived of life-imparting nutrients?) The creative word of the Kingdom typified by God's creative act in the old creation ("God said") becomes in the new the spark of immortality sown in our minds. The word of the Kingdom contains within it the reality of the life of the age to come, Kingdom life. So lucid is Jesus on the necessity for the reception of his Kingdom Gospel that he makes **repentance and forgiveness conditional upon the intelligent reception of the Kingdom Gospel (Mark 4:11-12)**. The Devil is so cognizant of the dramatic and dynamic effects of the Kingdom word, and its energy (1 Thess. 2:13) that he is intent on snatching that Kingdom Gospel away from the mind of the potential believers "so that they cannot believe it and be saved" (Luke 8:12). We remember Luke's favorite theme about believing. Zechariah was struck dumb for over nine months, while his wife was pregnant for failure to believe what God had said to him through Gabriel. Mary on the other hand demonstrated faith, real belief, by joyfully accepting and pondering the words of God through Gabriel. Zechariah 7:12 had warned that failure to believe "the word of God sent via the spirit through the prophets" was the cause of all problems. So it is today.

What, then, does evangelicalism have to say about repentance? From the section devoted to "Repentance and Salvation" we read this:

In the Gospel debate repentance is a hot topic...Must a person repent to be saved?...I wrote my doctoral dissertation on this very issue⁸...Repentance is not faith in Christ or a necessary precursor to that...Since repentance is not in John's gospel, it isn't a condition [for salvation]. The word *repentance* is not found in John's gospel. Yet the Fourth Gospel is the only book in all of Scripture whose stated purpose is evangelistic, that is, to tell unbelievers what they must do to have eternal life (John 20:31). [What??] Therefore it is extremely telling that the words *repent* and *repentance* do not occur there. This shows that repentance is *not* a synonym for faith in Christ and that it is *not* a necessary precursor to faith in Christ. If either were the case, *the book on evangelism would have said so* (pp. 938-939).

Then this amazing conclusion:

When John is writing to tell people what they must do to have eternal life, and he doesn't even mention repentance, a subject he was very familiar with, and one he was even commanded by our Lord to proclaim (Luke 24:47 [the Lukan great commission]), it is certain that repentance is not a condition of eternal life...We don't conclude..., do we, that baptism and instruction in discipleship are conditions of eternal life? In the same way, the Great Commission in Luke concerns discipleship. Repentance is indeed a condition of fellowship with God...[but repentance is nothing to do with salvation, he says] (p. 940-41).

This is such a muddle and cries out for reform.

⁷Note the very excellent teaching method of Scripture: First present a summary thesis statement and then "unpack" it in more detail, progressively shedding more and more light and fine-tuning our understanding in the process. This is a good way to impart learning.

⁸Earl Radmacher, the author of this part of Swindoll and Zuck's book *Understanding Christian Theology*.

Jesus is not so difficult: Repent and believe the Gospel of God about the Kingdom (Mark 1:14, 15). That is Christianity's central thesis statement around which everything else revolves.

I think I have said enough to show how much the Abrahamic system of salvation, by believing Jesus, believing what Jesus believed and thus believing in Jesus, is needed. And there is a call to action on the part of us all. We must take the light to others. Protestantism has inherited from Luther a subtle tendency to disparage the words of Jesus. Luther wrote about the book of Revelation, pontificating in 1522:

I miss more than one thing in this book, and this makes me hold it to be neither apostolic nor prophetic...I think of it almost as I do of the Fourth Book of Esdras, and can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it...It is just the same as if we did not have it, and there are many far better books for us to keep. Finally, let everyone think of it [Revelation] as his own spirit gives him to. My spirit cannot fit itself into this book. There is one sufficient reason for me not to think highly of it — Christ is not taught or known in it; but to teach Christ is the thing which an apostle is bound, above all else, to do, as He says in Acts 1, “Ye shall be my witnesses.” Therefore I stick to the books which give me Christ, clearly and purely.⁹

Luther said this about the relative importance of the Gospels:

From all this you can now judge all the books and decide among them which are the best...*John's Gospel is the one, tender, true chief Gospel*, far, far to be preferred to the other three and placed high above them. So, too, the Epistles of St. Paul and St. Peter far surpass the other three Gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In a word, St. John's Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul's Epistles, especially Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first Epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and good for you to know, *even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine*. Therefore St. James' Epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to them; for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.¹⁰

We the legacy of this tendency to emphasize certain New Testament books to the neglect of others in Protestantism to this day. It was clear that **St. Paul's writings (especially Romans) and John's gospel** were the favorites, and the books Luther liked less are too often neglected (especially Hebrews and James). Revelation is popular in some circles (particularly the Dispensationalists), but it is, of course, subject to countless wacko prophetic and apocalyptic scenarios.¹¹

Luther biographer Hartmann Grisar, S.J. (author of a massive six-volume biography), writes:

Luther's criticism of the Bible **proceeds along entirely subjective and arbitrary lines**. The value of the sacred writings is measured **by the rule of his own doctrine**. He treats the venerable canon of Scripture with a liberty which annihilates all certitude. For, while this list has the highest guarantee of sacred tradition and the backing of the Church, Luther makes religious sentiment the criterion by which to decide which books belong to the Bible, which are doubtful, and which are to be excluded. At the same time **he practically abandons the concept of inspiration**, for he says nothing of a special illuminative activity of God in connection with the writers' composition of the Sacred Book, notwithstanding that he holds the Bible to be the Word of God because its authors were sent by God...Thus *his attitude towards the Bible is really burdened with “flagrant contradictions,”* to use an expression of Harnack, especially since he “had broken through the external authority of the written word,” by his critical method. And of this, Luther is guilty, the very man who elsewhere represents the Bible as the sole principle of faith! If, in addition to this, his arbitrary method of interpretation is taken into consideration, the work of destruction wrought by him appears even greater. *The only weapon he possessed he wrested from his own hand*, as it were, both theoretically and in practice. His procedure regarding the sacred writings is apt to

⁹ Preface to the New Testament, 1522.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Dave Armstrong, “Luther vs. the Canon of the Bible,” ic.net/erasmus/RAZ325.htm (since deleted).

make thoughtful minds realize how great is *the necessity of an infallible Church* as divinely appointed guardian and authentic interpreter of the Bible.¹²

W. F. Adenay, D.D. principal of Lancashire College, Manchester:

With Luther the reformation was based on justification by faith. This truth Luther held to be confirmed (a) by its necessity, nothing else availing, and (b) by its effects, since in practice it brought peace, assurance and the new life. Then those Scriptures which manifestly supported the fundamental principle were held to be *ipso facto* inspired, and the measure of their support of it determined the degree of their authority. Thus the doctrine of justification by faith is not accepted because it is found in the Bible, but the Bible is accepted because it contains this doctrine. Moreover the Bible is sorted and arranged in grades according as it does so more or less clearly, and to Luther there is “a NT within the NT,” a kernel of all Scripture, consisting of those books which he sees as most clearly set forth the Gospel. Thus he wrote: “John’s Gospel, the epistles of Paul, especially Romans, Galatians, Ephesians and 1 Peter — these are the books which show you Christ, and teach all that it is needful and blessed to know, even if you never see or hear any other book, or any other doctrine. Therefore the epistle of James is a mere epistle of straw (*eine recht stroherne epistel*) since it has no character of the Gospel in it” (Pref. to NT, 1522; the passage was omitted from later editions). Luther places Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation at the end of his translation, after the other books, which he designates “the true and capital books of the NT, for these have been regarded in former times in a different light.”¹³

Luther at first (Preface in Translation of NT, 1522) expressed a strong aversion to the book [of Revelation], declaring that to him it had every mark of being neither prophetic nor apostolic...He cannot see that it was the work of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, he does not like the commands and threats which the writer makes about his book (22:18, 19), and the promise of blessedness to those who keep what is written in it (1:3, 22:7), *when no one knows what that is*, to say nothing of keeping it, and there are many nobler books to be kept. Moreover, many Fathers rejected the book...“Finally everyone thinks of it whatever his spirit imparts. My spirit cannot adapt itself to this book, and a sufficient reason why I do not esteem it highly is that *Christ is neither taught nor recognized in it*, which is what an apostle ought before all things to do.” Later (1534) Luther finds a possibility of Christian usefulness in the book...He still thought it a hidden, dumb prophecy unless interpreted, and upon the interpretation no certainty had been reached after many efforts...He remained doubtful about its apostolicity, and (in 1545) printed it with Hebrews, James and Jude as an appendix to his New Testament, not numbered in the index...Zwingli [a leading Reformer] regarded Revelation as “not a Biblical book,” and even Calvin, with his high view of inspiration, does not comment on 2 and 3 John and Revelation.¹⁴

Readers should reflect on the remarkable fact that churches have continued to place considerable faith in the spiritual leadership of Calvin and Luther, despite the former’s hesitancy about the Apocalypse (Calvin wrote no commentary on Revelation) and the latter’s apparent failure to heed the warnings of Jesus given in the Revelation:

I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book, if any one adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues written in the book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the prophecy, God will take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book (Rev. 22:18, 19).

Blessed is he who keeps the sayings of the prophecy of this book. Blessed is he who reads and they who hear the words of this prophecy and keep the things which are written in it: for the time is at hand (Rev. 1:3).

This hardly sounds as if the book could be safely relegated to an appendix!

The book of Revelation, as is well recognized, draws together the strands of Old Testament prophecy (it contains hundreds of allusions to and quotations from the Hebrew Bible) and describes the

¹² *Martin Luther: His Life and Work*, Newman Press, 1930, 263-265.

¹³ *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible* (one vol.), rep. Hendrickson, 1989, p. 116.

¹⁴ *Hastings, A Dictionary of the Bible* (1902), Vol. IV, p. 241, emphasis added.

establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth at the Second Coming of Jesus. It is the fitting climax to the expectations of both Old and New Testament, depicting the triumph of the Kingdom of God over a hostile world.

Abrahamics are charged with the ongoing process of reform, so partially achieved in the 1500s. We must protest the cavalier way in which C.S. Lewis declared that the “the Gospel is not in the Gospels.” We must call into question James Kennedy’s statement that “many people believe that the teachings of Jesus are most important, but that is not so.” What really counts, he said, is that God came and died for us. We must, with Bishop N.T. Wright in our time, complain that “heaven” is not the goal offered by Jesus. If I invite you, says the Bishop, to come and have a drink with me at my home and I store that drink in the fridge — I don’t expect you to climb into the fridge to enjoy the drink.

I say, long live the basic simple Messianic theology of Abrahamics who struggled to produce a kinder and sounder form of the faith easily demonstrable from hosts of simple, plain biblical texts. Action among us is likely to take place when we are suitably shocked, appalled and stimulated by finding out what is being taught in the name of Jesus — when, for example, we react in stunned amazement at the *Word Biblical Commentary* on Mark 12:29-34, the Shema: “Jesus’ affirmation of the Shema is neither remarkable nor specifically Christian” (p. 261).

Can you imagine a Christianity without the words of Jesus, surviving the judgment? Millions out there have been misled into thinking that the words of Jesus are dispensable. Remember what Professor Hiers told us at one of these conferences many years ago: “Interpreters of Christian persuasion have ordinarily not been especially interested in what Jesus intended and did in his own time.”¹⁵ So Jesus’ creed and Jesus’ Gospel...well, who cares?!!

The bracelet WWJD might better read What *Did* Jesus Do? Or better still, WDJS, What Did Jesus Say?

Appendix

How Not to Define the Gospel

Unger’s Concise Bible Dictionary:

GOSPEL. The word “gospel” means “good news.” The good news is addressed to lost humanity and centers in God’s grace, which rescues man from sin and restores him to God’s image and fellowship. The gospel was first announced when God promised Adam and Eve that the “seed of the woman” would crush the serpent’s head (Gen. 3:15). It was prefigured in the shed blood of the animal which God killed in order to clothe the naked sinners (Gen. 3:21). It was symbolized year after year in the blood of the animals that were offered in the Mosaic sacrificial system (Heb. 9:11-14, 19, 21).

When Christ, the true Sacrifice, was offered, the gospel in symbol became the gospel in reality (Heb. 9:11-15; 10:10-14). Sins which had previously been passed over were now instantly remitted for all those who had believed, whether before or after the Cross (Rom. 3:25, 26). The one human requirement for salvation is *faith in God’s grace revealed in Christ’s death and resurrection* (Rom. 10:8, 9; Eph. 2:8, 9). Absolutely no other requirement for salvation must be added or substituted. Any addition, change, or substitution corrupts the simple gospel of pure grace into “another gospel” – a heretical one which God’s people are instructed to denounce (Gal. 1:6-9). This spurious gospel may parade under various seductive forms. The test, however, is simple. Does the alleged gospel question the total sufficiency of God’s grace to save, keep, and perfect? If it does, perhaps by recommending some kind of human striving, it is to be branded “another gospel” and is to be rejected outright.

¹⁵ *Jesus and the Future*, 1981, p. 1.