

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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WHAT DID JESUS PREACH?

The March 2006 Newsweek magazine published a review of a book by Gary Wills entitled *What Jesus Meant* reviewed by David Gates in which he said: "Gary Wills' latest book "What Jesus Meant" should affront most of his fellow Christians right from the forward, which argues that Christ was not one of them. The megachurch set won't care to hear that 'Jesus did not come to replace the Temple with other buildings, whether huts or rich cathedrals.' The Christian left, committed to good works, won't care to hear that Jesus 'does not work miracles from humanitarian motives.' The Christian right, cozy with secular power, won't care to hear that 'if they want the state to be politically Christian, they are not following Jesus.' Pope Benedict XVI won't care to hear that he, 'like his predecessors, is returning to the religion Jesus renounced, with all its paraphernalia of priesthood.' What parishioner wants to hear that the Gospels are 'a deep threat to the institutional church,' since Jesus opposed 'just about every form of religion we know'."

Upon reading the book I found many other topics Wills touched upon, but one topic Jesus preached, and we might say was the main point of his ministry, seldom preached today as revealed in Scriptures and virtually unknown to the average Christian, he does not mention. That is "the kingdom of God". God's intention to establish his kingdom (reign) upon the earth is first introduced to us in Exodus 19:5, 6 when God reveals his purpose for Israel to be a kingdom of priests in these words: "Now then, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be my own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to Me a Kingdom of priests and a holy nation." This kingdom was predominantly earthly and simply pointed to a kingdom which would not be of this world. The New Testament opens with the ministry and preaching of John the Baptist. His message which startled the whole nation was "the Kingdom of God is at hand!" John introduced Jesus as the Messiah and he "came preaching the gospel of God" (Mark 1:14). The word gospel means "good news". So what was the good news Jesus preached? Salvation from sin? God's love for mankind? That he would die for the sins of the world? These and other important subjects Jesus certainly taught, but they were not the main thrust of his preaching. Continue in Mark 1:15: "and saying 'the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand' ". Matthew states it this way: "And Jesus was going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the Kingdom". Further: "Jesus was going about all the cities and the villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the Kingdom" (Matt. 9:35). In fact Jesus says the reason he was sent was to preach the Kingdom:

"I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also, because *for this purpose I have been sent.* (Luke 4:43). After his ascension the Apostles, and the early church continued preaching the same message Jesus preached: "the gospel of the kingdom of God." (Acts 8:12, 19:8, 20:25, 28:23,31). This is not the message being preached today.

If we set aside the churches in which the preacher's messages are a theology of psychology and well-being with messages that are easy going and entertaining without any mention of the fear of God, judgment, sin or repentance and healthy doses of positive thinking and consider the message of the so called fundamentalist Bible believing evangelical preaching today, we still hear little about the kingdom of God. In these circles outside the contemporary, up to date and so called relevant preaching of today, we hear much about being born again, man's need of salvation, and Jesus as a ransom for sin. Jesus certainly spoke about these things and they are Scriptural and important, but none of these themes were the theme of the message of Jesus. The new birth is only mentioned one time. This was in his conversation with Nicodemus. He mentions his dying as a ransom for us only one time (Matt. 20:28), and he only used the word "salvation" in very few passages. In contrast there are nearly a hundred references to the Kingdom of God in the gospels. When Jesus sent the Apostles out to preach he instructed them to preach *the Kingdom of God*: "as you go, preach saying 'the kingdom of God is at hand'" (Matt. 10:7), "He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to perform healing" (Luke 9:2), "...heal those who are sick, and say unto them 'the kingdom of God has come near to you'" (Luke 10: 9). The preaching of the kingdom was so important that Jesus instructed a man to "let the dead bury the dead, but you go everywhere and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:60).

It is only in the context of the Kingdom that being born again, salvation, redemption, forgiveness of sins, new life in Christ, and the whole message of conservative preaching has any meaning. These things are important but they are not an end within themselves. It is God's purpose to qualify us "to share in the inheritance of the saints of light, for he has delivered us from the domain (kingdom) of darkness, and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Col. 1:12,13). The ultimate purpose, then, of evangelism and preaching is to bring people into the kingdom of God and under the reign of God which is manifested in the life and teachings of his Son. When Jesus told Peter "upon this rock I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18) he went on to say "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (ver 19). It seems building the church was not an end in itself but a means of entering the Kingdom.

The church, then should be the physical manifestation of the kingdom or the reign of God in the earth. That which embraces all that Jesus said and did is in the good news of the Kingdom of God. Because God has established his reign upon the earth (the kingdom) man can be born anew, become new creatures, be filled with the Holy Spirit, have eternal life and have full and free access to the throne of God, that is, live in His very presence. Paul testifies of this when he says "For the Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). At the same time God has a people upon the earth in which He can dwell and who will represent Him before an unbelieving world.

Jesus in his ministry demonstrated what the kingdom of God is: "Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, 'the kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say 'look here it is' or 'there it is' for behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst.'" (Luke 17:20,21). Wherever Jesus was, there was the kingdom. He further stated: "But if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20). When we pray "Thy kingdom come" we are asking God to manifest Himself through us. In the light of all this we can conclude that the megachurches have a unique obligation and privilege, because of their sheer numbers, to demonstrate to a vast number of people what the kingdom of God is. The Christian left should realize the greatest humanitarian effort they can accomplish is to demonstrate the reality of the kingdom of God. The Christian right has the obligation to demonstrate the reality of the kingdom of God in contrast with the political kingdoms of man. Pope Benedict and his followers should realize the kingdom of God does away with the paraphernalia of a human priesthood. The "health and wealth, God wants you to be rich" preachers should realize that we are to "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). The small, struggling congregations scattered across our land should be encouraged by Luke 11:32 when Jesus said "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom."

The kingdom of heaven is more precious to us than anything we can own. "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which man found and hid; and for joy over it goes and sells all that he has and buys the field. Again the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matt. 13:44-46). This is the message that Jesus preached. Our task as a church is stated plainly in I Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light". This brings us back to God's stated purpose in Exodus 19:5,6 "Now then if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests..."

BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD

Perhaps one of the most confusing passages in Scripture is Paul's statement in I Corinthians 15:29: "Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?" There are too many opinionated interpretations of the passage to list them. Suffice it to say every commentary has some explanation of the text but none can say theirs is the correct one. To my knowledge the Mormons are the only ones who actually practice this baptism for the dead by proxy. This is one of those passages which we will never be able to ascertain for certain what the meaning is. It seems logical to say Paul must have expected his readers to understand what he was talking about, but to us the passage remains a mystery. I would like to present another interpretation which takes into consideration three principles.

First, in Paul's writings he would sometimes deviate from his main topic and develop another thought in parentheses. For example: In Ephesians 3:1 he states "for this reason" but does not finish that sentence until verse 14 where he comes back to "this reason". Verses 2-13 is a side issue of his main thought. Another example is Romans 6 & 7. His theme in chapters 1-5 is our justification by faith and not law. He deviates from this subject in chapters 6 & 7 to explain how we are dead to sin and the law, then returns to his subject in chapter 8. In I Cor. 15:12-19 Paul's subject is "If Christ be not raised". In verses 20-28 he leaves that theme for a moment and speaks of the exaltation and reign of Christ. Now lets say in verse 29 he returns to his subject "If Christ is not raised...what will those do who are baptized..."

This brings us to a second principle: that of punctuation. In the Greek there is no punctuation so this must be supplied by the translators. Sometimes this can change the whole meaning of a passage. For example the translation of Jesus' words to the thief on the cross: "Verily I say unto you, today you will be with me in Paradise". Now put the comma in another place: "verily I say unto you today, you will be with me in Paradise". This change of the comma changes the whole thought of the passage. Apply this to I Cor. 15:29: (If Christ be not raised from the dead) "Otherwise what will those do who are baptized"? (Question mark).

Now the third principle: In some passages there is an omission of one or more words that are obviously understood but must be supplied by the translators to make the sentence complete. (This is called an "ellipsis") These words are written in *italics* in most translations. Examples: Rom. 12 1: "present your bodies to God, *which is* your reasonable service..." and I Cor 12:1: "now concerning spiritual *gifts...*" Applying this principle to I Cor. 15:29: (If Christ is not raised from the dead) "Otherwise what will those do who are baptized? *Is it* for the dead? (Christ) If the dead are not raised at all why then are they baptized? *Is it* for them?"

"Finally brethren...think `on these things" (Phil. 4:8)

