

**VOS MADE EASIER:  
NEW TESTAMENT  
BIBLICAL THEOLOGY  
A LA  
GEERHARDUS VOS**

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“The God of Abraham ... judge between us.” Gen. 32:53



## PREFACE

Many years ago I lectured in OTBT at a reformed Seminary. I was asked to do a course in NTBT too, but was unable to find a textbook I was comfortable using. As a result I considered doing the lectures and writing them up for publication. However, I decided that was too big a task for me under the circumstances in which I found myself. I have long recognized Geerhardus Vos as one of the most accomplished authors in the field of Biblical theology. Ultimately, I did not do the NTBT lectures but I did recommend textbooks for a possible reading course on the subject. Chief among the recommended books was Dr. Vos' *Biblical Theology*. The only weakness in the book that stood out to me was his style of writing. The current book is an effort to render Vos' work in a somewhat more understandable form. I have added a few comments of my own even though I recognize that my efforts fall far short of the great Dr. Vos. I pray that the result will not be disappointing to the readers and that God will bless the effort.

In addition to simplifying Vos' work I have some section headings, added more detailed presentation of some Scripture citations, inserted more Scripture citations (often in footnotes), and appended some indexes (with special emphasis on significant Scriptural references). I hope the reader will find these helps truly useful.



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## Chapter I. INTRODUCTION

### A. The Covenantal Structure of Biblical Revelation/Theology

Although this is not the place to discuss the covenantal structure of biblical revelation in detail, in pursuit of this matter it might be helpful to survey various suggestions as to the relationship between Old and New Testament revelation. This will provide a needed background for the discussion of New Testament biblical theology that follows in the rest of this work. A more extended discussion of this matter may be found in the author's *Old Testament Biblical Theology 1, Introductory Matters*.<sup>1</sup> All approaches examined were found wanting except what is called covenantal theology. Then various covenantal positions were surveyed and evaluated.<sup>2</sup> The book concluded that the traditional position on covenant as advanced by the Westminster Standards was the correct position.<sup>3</sup> The covenant of grace rests on and presupposes the covenant of works as its logical and forensic context.

### B. The Features of Biblical Revelation

The previously mentioned book also presented the features of divine revelation as they are discussed by various Biblical scholars. Due to the limitations of space we were unable to conclude by reviewing the several features of divine revelation to be considered and set forth by a proper biblical theology. Prof. John Murray set them forth for us in his lectures on Old Testament biblical theology.<sup>4</sup>

First, it is historically progressive. This progression is cumulative but not uniform. Rather, the content or volume of revelation is determined in accordance with the divine mind and by its objective central relevance – basically its relevance to the plan and outworking

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<sup>1</sup> Coppes, *Old Testament Biblical Theology 1, Introductory Matters* (Providence Presbyterian Press, Denver, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> This evaluation of various covenantal approaches continues into the author's *From Adam to Adam Old Testament Biblical Theology, II* (Providence Presbyterian Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, 7.1-6.

<sup>4</sup> This material comes from Prof. Murray's lectures given in 1965 that the present author attended.

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of redemption for the elect. Where this characteristic is prominent there is more revelation recorded. On the other hand, revelation often attached itself to the subjective individual application of that objective redemptive content -- what was meaningful for a particular person or situation. In a real sense, revelation was not given in abstraction from particular needs. It was given in the milieu of subjective-individual application. So, what was revealed by God was revealed in terms of the divinely perceived needs of the people He was addressing at that time.

Secondly, divine revelation is actually embodied in history. Hence, the actions and words of God not only really occurred but also are as trustworthy and actual as other true events.

Thirdly, divine revelation is organic in nature. It is never disjointed but always conjoined with what preceded and followed. Thus, in order to understand any particular part of divine revelation one must understand what precedes and follows.

Fourth, divine revelation has, by nature, practical application. It is not mere theoretical propositions or conceptions. It is always designed to explain and enhance man's relationship with God.

### C. The Principles of Biblical Theology

Murray also presented the principles of a proper method of biblical theology.

The method of biblical theology is determined by the historical progressiveness of divine revelation. This revelatory process as reported in the Bible falls into distinct periods marked off by epoch-making events.

First, Murray noted the periodicity of this process. What are to be presented as the divisions of this process are not arbitrary derived but arise from the biblical record. He presented the following major periods in Old Testament revelation: from the creation to the fall, from the fall to the flood, from the flood to the call of Abraham, from the call of Abraham to the exodus, and, finally, from the exodus to the coming of



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Christ. Murray was open to further dividing these periods into additional sections, but noted that biblical writers and persons are aware of the periods just listed and refer to them.

Second, biblical theology should see the correlation between these periods. This includes taking account of both the unity and progressiveness of the revelation. So, one must be careful not to import into a period that which does not belong to that period. On the other hand, this does not preclude using early or later revelation when it is necessary to the understanding of a particular teaching. For example, Murray pointed to Heb. 11 as essential to the understanding of faith and of the promise of the land given to Abraham. This is not improperly importing latter truth. Rather it is using a necessary and divinely supplied explanation of that earlier revelation.

Third, biblical theology should observe the proportion or emphasis of each period. What in one period is peripheral later becomes central. The ever-increasing diversity and complexity of divine revelation requires us to observe carefully the distinctive emphases of each period. These emphases are determined by what in the revelation is appropriate to the precise situation with which that redemptive revelation deals.

In the second book on Old Testament biblical theology<sup>5</sup> we examined some of the content of the Bible using the framework of covenantal theology as set forth above. The Bible readily demonstrated that this was the system of revelation it sets forth. The unity of biblical revelation should be emphasized so that earlier revelation sometimes employs ideas and even particular parts of later revelation without explanation (e.g., the mention of clean animals in the Noachian period, Gen. 7:2). Also, it should be maintained that later explanations of earlier revelation are the correct and proper explanations and may rightly be employed in setting forth biblical theology (e.g., the explanation of Gen. 1 in Jn. 1 and Rom. 5<sup>6</sup>).

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<sup>5</sup> Coppes, *From Adam to Adam*, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Cf., note 6 below.

## D. The Relation of the Various Divisions of Old Testament Revelation

### 1. The Divisions of Old Testament Revelation

It is helpful to view the Old Testament revelation of the covenant of grace<sup>7</sup> in terms of six periods of revelation each focusing on a separate aspect of that revelation. On the other hand, from another perspective the prefall revelation may be termed the covenant of works<sup>8</sup> and the rest of Old Testament revelation the covenant of grace "proper". However looking at the entirety of the Old Testament as a single unit, the divisions of this covenant of grace (according to biblical terminology) are: (1) the prefall period (the prolegomena and foil of the covenant of grace proper), (2) the period from immediately after the fall (the period sometimes entitled the covenant with Adam) up to the revelation of God to Noah, (3) the period from Noah until Abraham, (4) what God revealed in and through Abraham, (5) the period under Moses until the time of David, (6) the period from David to Christ. The first period focuses on the covenant of works or a covenant in which the continuation of blessings graciously bestowed by God are conditioned upon man's perfect obedience to a single divine command, and God's requirement upon mankind of perfect obedience. The second period introduces the covenant grace (how God graciously restored Adam and Eve [man] to a covenantal relationship with Him on the grounds of the promised seed of the woman). The third period focuses on the grace of God in preserving the continuation of the earth. The Abrahamic period is marked by a clearer and more extended presentation of grace. The mosaic period sets forth the law of God (detailing how to live in relationship to God or living under God's rule), and the final period focuses on kingship and the promise of the coming Messiah and His kingdom.

### 2. The Relationship of the Various Divisions

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<sup>7</sup> The entire Old Testament is called one covenant at several points in the Bible. For a fuller discussion see Coppes, *From Adam to Adam*, p. 26ff.

<sup>8</sup> The covenant of works did not cease at the close of the prefall period but continued in effect, although subsequently changed and expanded, throughout the entire period of biblical revelation.

There are several additional principles important to understand the structure of the Old Testament.

First, the early chapters of the Old Testament emphasize the concept of covenant. Since we have just reviewed the basic definition and structure of the covenant of grace we will not repeat it here. The pre-fall revelation sets forth the covenant of works. This is established by what later portions of Scripture say about this period (Hos. 6:7, Isa. 24:5, Rom. 8:20-23, 5:12, etc.)<sup>9</sup>

Second, the covenant of works is not concluded at the fall. Many of its specifics, although sometimes not explicitly stated, continue throughout the period of the creation (until this present world passes away); they are creation ordinances. Its principles, except its probationary nature, certainly continue. In addition, it is important for us to understand that the covenant of works finds continuing application in man's responsibility to be perfectly obedient to the law of God both as expressed before the fall and after the fall (e.g., Christ's teaching that the pre-fall revelation specifying the nature and structure of marriage still binds man, Matt. 19:8; Rom. 3:19). The most detailed setting forth

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of these verses see, Coppes, *From Adam to Adam, Old Testament Biblical Theology II*, 40ff. Hos. 6:7, "But like Adam [NKJV, men] they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt treacherously with Me." Isa. 24:4,5, "The earth mourns and fades away, the world languishes and fades away; the haughty people of the earth languish. The earth is also defiled under its inhabitants, because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant." Jer. 33:20-21, Thus says the LORD: 'If you can break My covenant with the day and My covenant with the night, so that there will not be day and night in their season [cf., Gen. 1:14-18<sup>9</sup>], 'then My covenant may also be broken with David My servant, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and with the Levites, the priests, My ministers.'" Jer. 33:25-26, "Thus says the LORD: 'If My covenant is not with day and night, and if I have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth, 'then I will cast away the descendants of Jacob and David My servant, so that I will not take any of his descendants to be rulers over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For I will cause their captives to return, and will have mercy on them.'" Jer. 33:35-37, "Thus says the LORD, Who gives the sun for a light by day, the ordinances of the moon and the stars for a light by night, who disturbs the sea, and its waves roar (the LORD of hosts is His name): "If those ordinances depart from before Me, says the LORD, then the seed of Israel shall also cease from being a nation before Me forever." Thus says the LORD: "If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done, says the LORD."

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of the covenant of works is found in the Mosaic revelation. Although a covenant of grace in its foundational nature, the Mosaic revelation is covenant of works (or law) in its superstructural nature and in much of its exposition. Hence, Paul explains that the law which came four hundred and thirty years after Abraham (the covenant of grace) did not invalidate that previous covenant (Gal. 3:17). In the exposition in Gal. 3 Paul maintains that the Mosaic covenant was, indeed, a covenant of grace (vs. 21). He also maintains that all men are subject to the Mosaic Law and, hence, as violators of that law are under its curse and liable to its censure (cf., Rom. 3:19). Thus, Christ stands in the place of believers taking upon Himself the penalty for their sin as specified in the Mosaic Law (Gal. 3:8-13).

Also, in the second period of revelation God introduces the covenant of grace proper. It is recorded immediately after the fall and consists of the words and acts by which God restored Adam and Eve to fellowship with Him (applied redemption to them), and thus made possible a redemptive (saving) relationship for all mankind. This was redemption by means of a divinely designed and provided covering for man's sin (an atonement) and ultimately accomplished through the promised seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15). This constitutes the primary theme throughout the rest of divine revelation recorded in the Bible (Heb. 11). It finds its fulfillment in the person and work of Christ.

Third, it is also important for us to see that the Law is not contrary to grace (Gal. 3:19-22) but was added to "define" sin against God.<sup>10</sup> This "definition" functions for the unconverted and is used by God to point out and detail for men their sin (Rom. 7:7-13). But the Law is also for the converted and serves as a guide for holy living (Rom. 7:14-16).<sup>11</sup> Also, Paul says in Romans 8:6-9,

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<sup>10</sup> The law "defined" sin in the sense that it further detailed and specified particular sinful acts and the sinful nature of man out of which those acts arise.

<sup>11</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 19.4 properly teaches that the Old Testament civil law applies in the Christian era only insofar as its general equity may require, and that the provisions of the ceremonial law are abrogated (19.3). Moreover, a study of the proof texts offered in the WCF and Catechisms will demonstrate that the authors of these standards did not hesitate to argue from the principles expressed in the ceremonial law insofar as its general equity requires it.

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For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace. Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God, it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.

Finally, the Law leads one to Christ.

Now it should be evident that in Rom. 8 Paul is referring to the Law of Moses (and its further exposition throughout the Bible) when we compare Rom. 3:19-20,

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin.

Also, consider Gal. 3:10-14,

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, "Cursed *is* everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them." But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God *is* evident, for "the just shall live by faith." Yet the law is not of faith, but "the man who does them shall live by them." Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed *is* everyone who hangs on a tree"), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Fourth, the final period of Old Testament revelation, or the period which emphasizes kingdom, builds on and assumes the previous periods. Indeed, if one does not understand the concept covenant as defined in the first division of biblical revelation and the concept of law as it relates to covenant (as set forth under Moses), one cannot really understand the revelation set forth in the final division of the Old Tes-

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tament. This holds true for each kind of literature in this section: viz., history, poetry, prophecy, and wisdom.



## Chapter 2. THE STRUCTURE OF NEW TESTAMENT REVELATION

What, if any, is the structure of New Testament revelation?<sup>12</sup> This does not ask what is the internal structure, the organizational principle of New Testament theology. Rather, it asks about the historical and progressive divisions within what is recorded as the New Testament. It asks, for example, about chapter divisions within a book, not about the internal structure of an author's thesis. Since the New Testament is a revelation from God (its primary and original author), one must study it to see if there is an unfolding, a developing, structure set forth in the material itself. The structure of New Testament revelation is what God has made it. Human readers are observers and passive<sup>13</sup> recipients of what God has set forth. It is our responsibility and privilege to study what God has delivered to us, and to the best of our ability to relate that material faithfully. Hence, the structure of the New Testament revelation is to be sought from a study of that material itself.

Before looking to the New Testament, however, one must examine the entire Bible regarding its structure. A proper study of the Bible unveils three ways by which we can determine this structure as set forth within Scripture itself. These are: seeing what is taught about biblical structure, generally conceived, in the Old Testament; what, generally conceived, is taught in the New Testament; and what the New Testament teaches about its own internal structure. In the course of unearthing this internal structure of the two-fold division of biblical revelation we will note several distinctives that distinguish the New Testament revelation *per se*.

### A. What is Taught in the Old Testament

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<sup>12</sup> The material in the rest of this book is highly dependent on Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology-Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963 printing). Our attempt is to simplify Dr. Vos' monumental work.

<sup>13</sup> As far as the origin of the divine ideas is concerned and not with reference to what is referred to as the human element *per se*. B. B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, Revelation and Inspiration*, vol. 1 (Baker, Grand Rapids, 2003 reprint), 96f.



This study, like so many studies, warrants being opened with some general observations. First, it is important to note that the Old Testament is anticipatory and forward-looking. Much of what is in the Old Testament anticipates and foreshadows the New Testament revelation. Indeed, the Old Testament virtually requires the New Testament for proper understanding of itself. It teaches the same truths as the New Testament but with lesser clarity (Col. 2:17, Heb. 8:5, 10:1<sup>14</sup>).

Moreover, the message of the Old Testament repeatedly looks forward to what is revealed in the New Testament. It repeatedly speaks of Christ albeit often in a very anticipatory mode (Jn. 1:45, 5:45, Acts 26:22-23, Rom. 10:4<sup>15</sup>). From the outset it develops essentially one theme, redemption. It provides the background necessary for a fuller understanding of the New Testament revelation. For example, it sets forth the pre-fall and post-fall history with their spiritual/ theological explanations and implications. Thus, it provides the covenantal and forensic (legal) background, foil, and context of New Testament revelation. The Old Testament launches into its theme from the outset: restoration and redemption. It teaches and promises restoration by God and redemption provided by Him and this through the seed of the woman. Within this beginning there is a promise of a historical fulfillment and accomplishment of these promises. It is even more particularly and clearly set forth in eschatological and messianic prophecy. Eschatological prophecy is that part of Old Testament prophecy that speaks of the end times while messianic prophecy fo-

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<sup>14</sup> Col. 2:17, "... which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ." Heb. 8:5, "...who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, 'See *that* you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.'" Heb. 10:1, "For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, *and* not the very image of the things..."

<sup>15</sup> Jn. 1:45, 'Philip found Nathanael (*sic*) and said to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote -- Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.'" Jn. 5:45, "Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is *one* who accuses you -- Moses, in whom you trust." Acts 26:22-23, "Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come -- that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles." Rom, 10:4, "For Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."

cuses specifically on the promise and description of a future Messiah (an individual through whom redemption is to come).

This means that the Old Testament from the beginning was **eschatological** always looking forward to the consummation. At the same time, it is eschatological in the sense that it looks upward to the fulfillment in eternal life, including but not limited to the after-life. Then, too, mankind is called to and instructed in the means of living out life here on this earth in fellowship with God. In a way, all of life is to have an eternal dimension. All of life is also, in this sense, eschatological.<sup>16</sup> We may call these three consummative eschatology, upward-looking eschatology, and realized eschatology.

The future historical and new state set forth in the Old Testament is represented as “absolutely **perfect and enduring**.”<sup>17</sup> The then current state of affairs is represented as that which is “old” and that state that is to come will be “**new**.” In this sense the newness takes on the implication that this is a much-improved state. It will include, indeed is typified by, the reception of the new God-given spirit and a new God-given heart. These are terms that speak of regeneration by divine initiation. This period, unlike what Ezekiel says about the then-present period, will realize Israel’s obedience to the Lord and the historical actualization of her blessed relationship to God. They will be God’s people not just with respect to their historical background and their public profession. They will be God’s people in their historical reality and in their living-out their divine adoption. God will be their God in the fullest sense of that phrase. He will be their God not in the judgment Ezekiel so graphically and repeatedly declares. He will be their God in their experiential reception of all the divine blessings of the covenant. This era is not just new as to time and in formulation, but it is **new in quality**. It is **superior** to anything that previously existed.

The Old Testament specifically speaks about this new state in

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<sup>16</sup> This three-fold sense of “eschatological” can be very confusing if the author is not careful to specify which connotation he is employing.

<sup>17</sup> Vos, *op. cit.*, 321.

passages such as Isa 65:17 and Ezek 11:19.<sup>18</sup> Here the general idea of the coming new age in contrast with the old age is set forth in a clear but not yet fully explicit way. So, the word "new" appears almost incidentally (Vos describes its use as semi-conscious<sup>19</sup>). Nevertheless the word is "technical" insofar as it is used to entitle the coming age. This usage appears in the New Testament in the following passages where its use "automatically" refers to the promised age: e.g., 2 Cor. 5:17, and Rev. 2:17.<sup>20</sup>

Jer. 31:31-34<sup>21</sup> more clearly announces this great distinction within redemptive history (what God does) and, by implication, within biblical revelation (what God says about His acts). This new age entailing a new state is labeled with the phrase "new covenant" (31).<sup>22</sup> By implication, this phrase introduces us to the idea of "old covenant." That is, in Jer. 31:31 God implies the existence of an old covenant when He speaks of a new covenant yet to come. Again, it is new not just in the sense of time but also in the sense of being of a superior quality. So, the old covenant about which God speaks in verse 32 is not only specifically the "covenant ... made with the fathers," but He explicitly and qualitatively contrasts the new covenant to come with

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<sup>18</sup> Isa. 65:17, "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind." Ezek. 11:19-20, "Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God."

<sup>19</sup> Vos, 321.

<sup>20</sup> 2 Cor. 5:17, "Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." Rev. 2:17, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives *it*."

<sup>21</sup> Jer. 31:31-34, "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah -- not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day *that* I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," says the LORD. "For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

<sup>22</sup> The translation "covenant" is defined and defended in Coppes, *From Adam to Adam*, 7ff.

that former covenant. The contrast is made not simply in terms of “old” versus “new,” but as to its particulars including God putting His law in their minds, and writing His law on their hearts. Under the former covenant God’s word was in their mouths and hearts,<sup>23</sup> but this promise of a new covenant, although using somewhat the same words, clearly implies a much improved and **blessed** state. This improvement is specifically described as “they all shall **know** Me ... for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (34).<sup>24</sup> It is evident that God will change them in such a way that He will forgive their sin and remember it no more, and that they will have a new inward nature and disposition. Surely, this *knowing* is an Old Testament description of regeneration resulting from divine action and justification by grace through faith. In other words, the new covenant will entail a fuller and clearer application of the salvation and redemption lying at the core of Old Testament religion. It will be not only new but **better**.

This interpretation is in agreement with Heb. 8:6-13:

<sup>6</sup> But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. <sup>7</sup> For if that first *covenant* had been faultless, and then no place would have been sought for a second. <sup>8</sup> Because finding fault with them, He says: "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah -- <sup>9</sup> "not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LORD. <sup>10</sup> "For this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. <sup>11</sup> "None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. <sup>12</sup> "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and

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<sup>23</sup> Deut. 30:14-15, "But the word *is* very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it. <sup>5</sup> See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil..."

<sup>24</sup> John 6:45, "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me."

their lawless deeds I will remember no more." <sup>13</sup> In that He says, "A new *covenant*," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

## B. What is Taught in the Gospels

### 1. The Old and New Covenant – God's-Christ's (Man) Agreement

Jeremiah's phrase "new covenant" does not occur again in the Old Testament. It first appears in the New Testament when Jesus spoke it at the Last Supper. In Matt. 26:28 we read that Jesus said, "For this is My blood of the **new covenant**, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."<sup>25</sup> Mk. 14:24 and Paul in 1 Cor. 11:25 report His words as, "the new covenant in my blood." There is a slight difference in the wording between these two reports but this difference should not cause us to stumble. It may be that Jesus stated the concept more than once and did not repeat Himself exactly, although He did repeat the same idea. On the other hand, it may be that since the reporters do not necessarily intend to make word for word citations, the difference in the reports may be due to the writers' (reporters') uniqueness in citation and emphasis. Moreover, since all that they wrote is divinely inspired and therefore of God's design, the variations reflect what God intends for us to have before us.

For our present discussion **the significant thing** is the occurrence of the phrase "the blood of the new covenant." With these words Jesus declared that His blood (death) is the basis of the "new religious relationship of the disciples to God."<sup>26</sup> His words repeat the words and phrases of Exod. 24<sup>27</sup> and Jer. 31. Exod. 24 is the record of the covenant inaugurating meal by which the covenant God made through Moses was signified and sealed. With the use of the phrase "the blood of the covenant," Jesus clearly alludes to Exod.24 and sets forth a contrast between that covenant and the one He now addresses. So, too, with the allusion to Jer. 31, Jesus both implies a "contrast

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<sup>25</sup> Mk. 14:24 reads, "This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many."

<sup>26</sup> Vos, 322.

<sup>27</sup> Exod. 24:8, "This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words."

between something past abrogated and something new substituted." This same idea, in somewhat different words, is represented by the words "new covenant in my blood" used by Luke and Paul. Hence, Jesus teaches us that the new age entails a new and better age of **religious privilege** (insofar as being in covenant with God involves and is a religious privilege).

As such, the **old covenant** and the relationship it declared and defined between God and His people is now "**abrogated**" in His death (blood) and the new replaces it. Thus, we are told of "two distinct dispensations of religious privilege." Then, Jesus adds that this new order or relationship is a **permanent** order when He says, "I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom" (Matt. 26:29). On the one hand, this is the same Kingdom of God Jesus came to introduce (cf., Mk. 1:15; Jn. 3:3<sup>28</sup>). Jesus not only came to introduce the Kingdom of God but, as He repeatedly taught, He did introduce it, cf., Jn. 3:3, 16-21. On the other hand, Luke's report of this statement reads, "*until* the kingdom of God comes." So, while there is a clear sense in which Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God as already present during His pre-resurrection ministry (Lk. 17:20-21<sup>29</sup>), here at the Lord's Supper He is clearly speaking of some sense of the kingdom that, as He speaks, has not yet come. This is the sense that the apostles spoke about in Acts 1:6-7.<sup>30</sup> It entails the idea of a final kingdom, a **final** state. Indeed, this usage reflects what is said in Matt. 20:21-23<sup>31</sup> where Jesus

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<sup>28</sup> Mk. 1:15, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." Jn. 3:3, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

<sup>29</sup> Lk. 17:20-21, "Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, 'The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.'"

<sup>30</sup> Acts 1:6-7, "Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, 'Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' And He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority.'"

<sup>31</sup> Matt. 20:21-23, "And He said to her, 'What do you wish?' She said to Him, 'Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.' But Jesus answered and said, 'You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' They said to Him, 'We are able.' So He said to them, 'You will indeed drink My cup,

speaks of the eternal eschatological kingdom. So, what Jesus describes as the new covenant here at the Last Supper is the covenant that will be celebrated by means of another Lord's Supper in the eternal eschatological (future and final) kingdom of God. Thus, the "new covenant" speaks not only of a new era of revelation, but also and primarily of a new era of **access** to God and points forward to the perfect eternal state in heaven (cf., the above discussion of Jer. 31:31).

## 2. The Old and New Administration – God's Application

Some additional ideas appear in Jer. 31:31ff. that further specify the nature of this new age. First, God (Jehovah, the covenant making and covenant keeping God) will "create obedience to the law through writing it in the heart." Secondly, "there will be complete forgiveness of sin."<sup>32</sup> Thus, there will be a **new administration** replacing the **old administration**.

Paul writes of the same foundational distinction in the history of redemption (what God is doing to effect redemption) and in the history of revelation (what God reveals about what He is doing). He writes of law (the former era) and faith (the present new era) teaching that these two exist as consecutive forms: cf., "after faith has come" (Gal. 3:23-25).<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere, he sets before us "the formal distinction" between the "old covenant" and the "new covenant" (2 Cor. 3:6, 14).<sup>34</sup> Moreover, he contrasts these two phrases in terms of "two religious ministrations" (3:7-9), an **old and a new administration**. The first is the ministration of the letter that kills and the second is that of the Spirit who **gives life**, that of condemnation and that of **righteousness**.

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and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but *it is for those* for whom it is prepared by My Father."

<sup>32</sup> Vos, 322.

<sup>33</sup> Gal. 3:23-25, "But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor *to bring us* to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor."

<sup>34</sup> Vos, 323. 2 Cor. 3:6, 8, "...who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. ... For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the *veil* is taken away in Christ."

### 3. The Old and New Structure of Revelation – Man’s Acquisition

Finally, Jeremiah contrasts the old and the new when he extends the change under the new age to the areas of revelation and of the knowledge of God in the words, "they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them" (man’s acquisition).

The ministrations (the divine methods of applying redemption) imply and reflect the “idea of difference in revelation” (what God says about these matters).<sup>35</sup> So, the distinction between the two religious ministrations presupposes a difference in divine revelation, that there is an **old and new structure of revelation**.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Paul contrasts the mediation of “reading” of the Old Testament (2 Cor. 3:14) and of the Law (3:15) as a description of the older revelation with the **immediateness** of New Testament “speech” (3:12) and of the **transforming** results of the vision (beholding) of the glory of the Lord (i.e., of the Lord of glory) as New Testament believers read the Bible. Believers and unbelievers read the same Bible but for the unbelievers a veil lies on their hearts and the words are dead letters to them. When the believer reads the Bible the veil is lifted and the words serve as a mirror reflecting the Lord of glory. To be certain, the new covenant and its ministration include additional revelation, but part of the newness of this new covenant is the opening of the believer’s eyes to the anticipatory and introductory (forward-looking) nature of what was formerly revealed (the Old Testament).<sup>37</sup> That is, opening our eyes to see the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> It is an ever-present assumed teaching in the course of biblical revelation that the divine acts of redemption are accompanied by, or followed by divine revelation explaining and applying the divine acts.

<sup>37</sup> Some have seen 2 Cor. 3:14f. and its mention of an “Old Testament” as a proof-text for the distinction between, and teaching that, there are two canons: the Old Testament canon (already seen as existing) and the New Testament canon (seen as coming into existence). However, this verse does not imply a new canon alongside the old since the phrase “reading of the Old Testament” (3:14) simply signifies the reading of the Law of Moses (3:15). It is important to note that here in 3:14-15 the Law of Moses in a phrase representing the entire Old Testament – as it is elsewhere in the New Testament. Moreover, here in vs. 14-15 the idea is not that of canon since vs. 6 describes New Testament ministers (ministers of the new covenant) conceived not as ministers of a canon but as ministers of a new revelation that is now revealed in Christ and through the apostles and those otherwise divinely



Old Testament as the necessary introduction to the New Testament, an introduction that supplies (anticipates and fore-shadows) both needed historical background, and also much necessary theological background.<sup>38</sup>

This aspect of Jeremiah's statement is expanded and expounded in the book of Hebrews. Hebrews also employs the idea of a division in the structure of revelation (what God said, i.e., the old lesser covenant, and the newer better covenant) throughout its pages. This idea in turn reflects and rests on the idea of the "structure of redemptive procedure" (what God did) itself. We are taught that there were two stages in the process of redemption: the old and the new, and that these two distinct stages have produced and reflect two covenants, the old (first) and the new covenants.

"And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance" (Heb. 9:15).

It is evident from the context (9:11-15, 8:4-8. etc.) that what is termed "first covenant" is what we have been calling the "old covenant."

That the new covenant is organically tied to the unfolding of revelation resting on and coming after the Old covenant was set forth is seen in Heb. 1,

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets,<sup>2</sup> has in these last days spoken to us by *His* Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds... (Heb. 1:1-2)

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certified to the New Testament believers. Therefore the contrast between new covenant and old covenant is not between two canons (or two parts of the one canon). Rather, it is a contrast between two bodies of revelation. Vos, 323.

<sup>38</sup> Although 2 Cor. 3 does not address the history of the canon, this is a most important issue for believers. This matter is addressed at length in B. B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, Revelation and Inspiration*. Prof. Warfield carefully and clearly demonstrates that the New Testament writers and speakers acknowledged the Old Testament as canon (authoritative writing). They not only set the New Testament writings alongside the Old Testament canon, but also acknowledge the New Testament writings as of equal authority with that Old Testament canon. So, the New Testament writings are acknowledged as part of the canon, and yet as a distinct group alongside the Old Testament writings,

Here again we see two ministrations, two periods of revelation: first, “God having spoken ... through the prophets”, and second “[God] has spoken through *His* son ...” The language argues that the former (having spoken) is preparatory to the latter (has spoken).<sup>39</sup> As such it was repeated and on-going always pointing ahead. In contrast, this new dispensing is set forth as **final** both here in Hebrews and in the Old Testament (see above). This new revelation is not represented as a step towards yet another stage of divine revelation, but it is the final, the last, revelation (as the use of the aorist tense argues).

So, in verse 1 the Old Testament prophets are several (the word is plural) and the clear implication is that the product of God’s speaking through them was a sequence (albeit conceived as a unit), a history, pointing to the finality in Christ (verse 2). The speaking in Christ, moreover, is depicted as punctiliar (as is usually indicated by the aorist tense). Indeed, all that came after Him is seen as not only a part, but as an unfolding and explanation, of His person and work. There is “no higher speech” than that which is given in “Son-speech” – qualitatively so called.<sup>40</sup> We may call this highest speech “Son-speech.” As such, the Bible implies that this speech is more than mere speech. It is speaking by means of the Son. Indeed, the revealing (the speaking) is both speech and act, and it is both person and work. This speaking is

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<sup>39</sup> “Having spoken” is written in the Greek aorist participial form and “has spoken” in the aorist indicative form. The aorist participle communicates action that precedes the action of the primary verb (has spoken). The action so described, the act of God’s speaking, is thus conceived as one action in two parts since the same God who spoke to the fathers (it is necessarily implied that these are our fathers) has spoken in these last days (it is necessarily implied that the days when the author is writing and the days in which the readers are living are the last days of those former days in which God spoke to the fathers). Thus, we are taught, by necessary implication, that God has taught the entirety of His revelation in that former revelation(s) and this present revelation. The “spoken to us by *His* Son” is recorded in the aorist tense which, in this context, pictures the entire activity as a single activity just as the “spoke in time past” is in the aorist tense and for the same reason pictures, in addition to what is said above, that activity as a single activity.

<sup>40</sup> In Heb. 1:1 the word “son” is anarthrous. This means that the emphasis is not on the identity of “son” in His relation to the Father or even in His relation to other “sons” (although these two ideas should not be ruled out they are not the matter being emphasized), Rather, the emphasis is on the quality of (divine) sonship belonging to the one in and by whom the speaking is taking place. This emphasis is similar to what appears in the Gospel of John where the revelation of God Himself is not only in Jesus’ words and works, but also in His nature *per se*.

taking place in the “fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4<sup>41</sup>), a phrase implying that there is no fuller time ahead. This is the **fullness**. Gal. 4:4 constitutes a supplement to Heb. 1:1-2 also arguing that the latter does not teach the sequence of revelation to be Old Testament, Jesus, Apostles, but that the sequence is Old Testament, Jesus (Apostles). Also, seen from another perspective, **Jesus is the fullness**. The New Testament is seen as a single organic whole, a fullness (“God...has spoken in *His* Son”). The apostles are viewed as witnesses and interpreters of Christ the Son. Jesus is the fact of New Testament revelation and the Apostles are the expositors of that fact. **Jesus is the central matter** of the New Testament revelation. All else is “organized around Him.”<sup>42</sup> This central fact is to be understood properly only as it is expounded in the Old Testament and by Jesus’ inspired expositors (Jn. 5:29, 16:12-15<sup>43</sup>). Jesus holds forth these two expositors, the Old Testament and the New Testament, as the authoritative and sufficient explanations of Himself and His ministry. So, Jesus taught a didactic identity between Himself and these two expositors. What they teach is what He is and teaches. Such an identity is made real to believers through the work of the Holy Spirit.

### C. What is Taught in the Apostolic Writings

The life of Christ as reported in the Gospels presents His most significant redemptive acts toward the end of His life. Jesus departed from this world before providing an extended explanation of His person and work set forth in these final and important facts. Therefore, just as the teaching in and of Jesus rests on and assumes the Old Testament teaching to unveil its meaning, significance and importance, so **His teaching also rests on and assumes the Apostolic teaching**. “As

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<sup>41</sup> Gal. 4:4, “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law...”

<sup>42</sup> Vos, 325.

<sup>43</sup> Jn. 5:39, “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.” Jn. 16:12-15, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear *them* now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own *authority*, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare *it* to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare *it* to you.”

the latter [the Apostolic teaching] would have been empty, lacking the fact, so the former [the Gospels] would have been blind, because of lacking the light.”<sup>44</sup>

The record of the life of Jesus does set forth more than the fact of His person and work, it also presents His teaching about that same factual material. The teaching at this stage, i.e., within the Gospel records (and, in Acts too) is “more sporadic and less comprehensive than that supplied by the Epistles.”<sup>45</sup> The **Epistles extend and further explain** the person and work, the word and deed, of Jesus (and the early church – Acts). One should also notice that the Epistles were written before the Gospels, even though the events recorded in the Gospels occurred first historically. The organization of the Bible, where the Gospels and Acts come first and then come the Epistles, is due only in part to the actual history of the events they record. Historically speaking, the Epistles were produced mostly during the same time frame that saw the unfolding of the events in Acts. The organization of the New Testament, however, does conform to the frequent, if not usual, development of divine revelation. First, comes the fact(s) of redemption and then comes the explanation. This great divine process and plan of revelation has often been ignored or overlooked, especially in modern times.<sup>46</sup>

What has been said to this point **explains why we can justly speak of New Testament revelation** (what has been written) **and of its exposition**, New Testament theology (what is taught by that written testimony). This also **explains the biblical phenomenon whereby the Old Testament is so much longer than the New Testament** in time covered and material written. To frame the issue in such terms (it is so much longer) shows that one has erroneously looked upon the New Testament revelation “too much by itself”.<sup>47</sup> That is, one is speaking as if the Old Testament stands by itself as a separate entity

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<sup>44</sup> Vos. Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Vos. Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> This is particularly true with reference to modern claims of divine revelation attested in tongues speaking and various “mystical” manifestations. These revelations from God appear without any further advance in the redeeming process (redemptive history).

<sup>47</sup> Vos, Ibid.

only. However, the disproportion disappears when one considers that **the New Testament is the final and perfect explanation of the Old Testament.** In this sense, it is part of the Old Testament. Then, too, **the New Testament records but the beginning of the entire period covered by the new covenant.** That period continues today and will continue until our Lord returns. So, the New Testament revelation “being the final one, stretches over all the extent of the order of things Christ came to inaugurate.”<sup>48</sup> In contrast to the old covenant that has passed away, the new covenant is called an “eternal covenant” (Heb. 13:20<sup>49</sup>). This eternal covenant is the final, the truly eschatological covenant. Christ is the great “Consummator.” This period of New Testament revelation covers the entire salvation era. The Old Testament may be properly viewed as “the revelation-overture.”<sup>50</sup> Biblical theology, however, deals only with the salvation-era itself and specifically with the written material known as the New Testament.

With respect to the New Testament the first great division of the material is the distinction between the “revelation through Christ directly” and the “revelation mediated by Christ through the Apostolate.”<sup>51</sup> Within this overture of the New Testament revelation (overture to the salvation-era) one may properly, biblically speaking, distinguish between the material that precedes, or introduces, Jesus’ public ministry and the material presenting the ministry itself. The initial, or precedent revelation, further subdivides into the nativity and its accompaniments, the ministry of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus by John, and Jesus’ great temptation (probation).

#### D. The Finality of New Testament Revelation

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> The New King James renders “everlasting covenant” as though the distinguishing feature of this covenant of Christ is that, once given, it lasts forever (or as long as this creation lasts), i.e., this covenant is subject to the limits of time. The English Standard Version more correctly renders “eternal covenant” as though this covenant in Christ has effects extending above and beyond the limits of time. The context in Hebrews clearly argues for the latter translation.

<sup>50</sup> Vos, 326.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

One may wonder whether what has been said as to the relationship between fact and explanation in the history of redemption allows for additional revelation in this period before the Second Coming of Jesus. Prior to the Second Coming (a new fact), one might argue for the appearance of further divine explanation. The answer to this question involves other matters. First, one must keep in mind that generally speaking God's revelations have been redemptive insofar as they are attached to and explain additional divine acts of redemption. In other words, **God provides new revelation as a matter of explaining new redemptive and historical acts.** This raises the question as to the possibility of added revelation preceding the Second Coming of Christ.

If one believes that the Bible teaches that the next historical redemptive act is the Second Coming of Jesus then it follows that God may well provide additional divine explanation of that great event. **If one believes that this Second Coming is part of the final already divinely explained divine act in creation history, then there will be no more divine revelation** before the end of the creation period insofar as explanation normally accompanies heretofore *unexplained* fact. There is no need for additional divine explanation because that explanation has already been given. The Second Coming is presented, biblically speaking, as the consummation of what has already been given, i.e., the New Testament word of prophecy and interpretation. The New Testament revelation is the final speaking of God in "*His Son.*"

The closing of the canon also rests on the following additional reasoning. The Old Testament prophesies it will cease.<sup>52</sup> Christ and the apostolate spoke "all things".<sup>53</sup> Thus, the foundational struc-

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<sup>52</sup> Dan. 9:24, "Seventy weeks are determined For your people and for your holy city, To finish the transgression, To make an end of sins, To make reconciliation for iniquity, To bring in everlasting righteousness, To seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy." Cf., E.J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1964 reprint), 200: "This fifth clause seems to stand over against the second, *for completing sin*. When sin is brought to an end by the appearance of the Messiah, so prophecy, which had predicted His coming and His saving work, is no longer needed. It has fulfilled its task and is therefore sealed up."

<sup>53</sup> Jn. 14:26. "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you."

ture (the New Testament revelation and the resulting canon) of the New Testament declaration was different than that of the Old Testament.<sup>54</sup> First, Christ (as the cornerstone of the new foundation) exceeded Moses as a son exceeds a servant (Eph. 2:20<sup>55</sup>, Heb. 3:4-6<sup>56</sup>). Secondly, Christ (as foundational revelation, Heb. 1:1 3:4-6<sup>57</sup>) exceeded not only Moses but also the prophets and the angels of God as well as the messages they bore (Heb. 1:1-2:4). His "foundation" was the perfect foundation that once laid was as complete and final as was His work of redemption.<sup>58</sup> Neither could be improved upon nor added to. Thirdly, the foundation (i.e., Christ) was also conceived as the apostolate and prophets with Christ being the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20<sup>59</sup>). It was one unit: Christ-apostolate-prophets. Fourthly, within this unit the prophets were tied to the unit Christ-apostles (only they were given "all things," Jn. 14:26<sup>60</sup>) as the Old Testament prophets were tied to Moses. However, unlike the Old Testament prophets their New Testament counterparts were part of the foundation. The foundation was a "laid-thing," and the church could be built upon it (Eph. 2:21, Jude 3, 20<sup>61</sup>). Therefore, although the New Testament

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<sup>54</sup> Acts 26:22, "Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses [the Old Testament] said would come." Rev, 21:12, 14, "Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb." Also, see Heb. 3:4-6.

<sup>55</sup> Eph. 2:20, "having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief *cornerstone*."

<sup>56</sup> Heb. 3:4-6, "For every house is built by someone, but He who built all things *is* God. And Moses indeed *was* faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken *afterward*, but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end."

<sup>57</sup> Heb. 1:1, "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets."

<sup>58</sup> 1 Cor, 3:11, "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

<sup>59</sup> Eph. 2:20, "having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief *cornerstone*."

<sup>60</sup> Jn. 14:26, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you."

<sup>61</sup> Eph 2:21, "in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord..." Jude 1:3, 20, "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. ... But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit..."

## THE STRUCTURE OF NEW TESTAMENT REVELATION

prophets were not simply parrots of the apostolate, they were so integrally related to it that the cessation of the apostolate meant the cessation of prophecy. God disclosed no additional verbal revelation because He had used the foundational events to lay the foundation.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Leonard Coppes, *Whatever Happened to Biblical Tongues* (Providence Presbyterian Press reprint, Thornton, CO, 1977), 45.





### Chapter 3. REVELATION SETTING FORTH THE PROLOGUE

The first division of the revelation dealing with the life and ministry of Jesus may be called the Prologue. This section covers all that material in the Gospels that is prior to the public ministry of Christ. It falls rather obviously into three sections: the revelation connected with the nativity, the revelation connected with John the Baptist, and revelation in the probation of Jesus. These sections are not of equal length but they do naturally arise from a study of the Gospels.

#### A. Revelation Connected With the Nativity.

##### 1. The Focus on Christ's Appearing on Earth

The name of this period, the nativity, is designed to capture the point of view of things as present in the Bible. The chief event of the period, theologically speaking, is **the incarnation**. Some prefer to speak of this period under this heading but it does not set forth the general content of the period.

The incarnation perspective certainly is important and dominates later explanations of this period. This title focuses on the movement from heaven to earth. This is a moving from the divine to the human. Here the pre-existent Son of God takes upon Himself human nature. He becomes a man without ceasing to be God. With this act the infinite and eternal God enters into finite human history. This fact appears by way of reference and allusion in the teaching of Jesus (as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke). The teaching of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of John more often and more clearly speaks of the incarnation, the fact that Jesus is the Son of God: true God and true man. Paul presents this doctrine in a full and explicit form. However, its classical formulation appears in the prologue to the Gospel of John and in his epistles.

In the early presentations of Christ's birth and what immediately follows, the perspective is not primarily on the heavenly coming to earth, but on the merely earthly events.

## 2. The Historical Character of the Nativity

Some scholars insist that the only proper approach to the nativity (and all Bible history) is to assume it is purely natural. Thus they declare that all that is contrary to their concept of natural law is unhistorical. Others conclude that what the Bible presents to us is not historical because it includes what is more than humanists think is natural. Indeed, they conclude that the nativity stories are myth, i.e., humanly created stories about the gods. These conclusions rest on preconceived understandings of what may happen and what may not happen in history.<sup>63</sup> As such they are not truly scientific insofar as "science" to be self-consistent ought to operate self-consciously on Biblical presuppositions. God does exist and He does enter into history. Therefore, history that speaks of God's operations in history is truly history.

The revelation of this period has rightly been described as incarnational because the major subject dealt with here is the incarnation. On the other hand, the biblical presentation is more historical than theological so **the revealed material is more focused on what happened than on the theology of what happened.**

Secondly, there is a focus on the historical but **the supernatural is not absent.** The entire matter is presented in terms of the breaking into history by the Lord God, i.e., it is presented in terms of the supernatural being manifested in the historical. Moreover, all is set forth from the perspective of the nativity, the birth of Jesus and the events preceding and surrounding it. Since the point of view of this presentation is incarnational, one sees the effects of the vertical movement of things from eternity into time. In the nativity one sees the **pre-existent Messiah** enter into human nature, the eternal (supra-historical) enters into created history. Jesus alludes to this in His teaching in the Gospels. It is especially prominent and pointed in His teaching recorded in the Gospel of John. Paul's teaching regarding this supernatural ele-

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<sup>63</sup> See *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. II (Reprinted by Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 2003), "The Foresight of Jesus," 71-97, and B.B. Warfield review of Albert Schweitzer's "The Quest of the Historical Jesus," in *Princeton Theological Review* 9, 1911, 132-141.

ment is even more clear and pointed at some points. The clearest and classical formulation, however, occurs in the prologue to the fourth Gospel and in John's epistles.

Thirdly, at this first stage of affairs, the progress of redemptive history (what God does in history to reveal and effect redemption) is **depicted in terms of historical events**. History functions somewhat to veil the supernatural, e.g., the mystery of **the two-fold nature** of Christ. There is a prominent focus on **the fulfillment of prophecy** as God works out, applies, and carries forth the Old Testament covenant and its promises. It is explicitly taught that what God promised regarding the Messiah's coming is now coming to pass. What was ideational (not yet concrete reality) in the Old Testament covenantal promises now becomes concrete and actual. Again, this is not to say that the supernatural is now reduced to the natural, but that the supernatural entered history and "became a piece of history in its highest form."<sup>64</sup> The supernatural and natural, therefore, are not mutually exclusive. The prejudice of some historians who hold that history by definition allows only the natural (as they define it), must be set aside.<sup>65</sup>

### 3. The Pieces of this Period

The pieces of this period are:

1. the annunciation of the angel to Joseph, Matt. 1:20
2. the annunciation of Gabriel to Zechariah, Lk. 1:11-22
3. the annunciation of Gabriel to Mary, Lk. 1:26-38
4. the prophecy of Elizabeth, Lk. 1:42-45
5. the psalm of Mary (the "Magnificat"), Lk. 1:46-55
6. the prophecy of Zechariah, Lk. 1:68-72

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<sup>64</sup> Vos. 328.

<sup>65</sup> So, Van Til correctly argues that the Christian's concept of the rational and irrational must be derived from the Bible (God), and that the unbeliever's prejudicial and God-denying presupposition of the definitions of the rational and the irrational must be rejected by the believer and seen as prejudicial, i.e., as presupposing the impossibility of all that is truly Christian and, indeed, of all that is actually true. Unbelievers may have truth but this truth is contrary to their presuppositions. In other words, when they have truth they are using borrowed capital insofar as they "borrow" that truth, from the Christian or biblical worldview.

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7. the announcement of the angels to the shepherds, followed by the angelic song, Lk. 2:10-14
8. the prophecy of Simeon ("the Nunc Dimittis"), Lk. 2:29-35
9. the prophecy of Anna, Lk. 2:38

### 4. The Characteristics of this Revelation

#### a. It Employs Old Testament Phraseology

The history set forth in these nine pieces evidences nine characteristics. First, the revelation is couched in **terms** clearly **reminiscent of Old Testament** language (modes of expression). This was appropriate in view of the fact that this is the *New Testament*, and that the two Testaments are, in reality, two parts of the whole revelation of God to man (the covenant of grace). Also, this New Testament revelation was initially addressed primarily to those who were Jews in background and faith. As such, they had close familiarity with the Old Testament. So, it is given in terms its initial recipients knew and understood. We note, for example, that the Magnificat repeatedly contains both direct and indirect allusions to the Psalms (89:10, 103:9, 17, 107:9), the prayer-song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-20), Job (5:11, 12:19) Isaiah (41:8-9), and Micah (7:20).<sup>66</sup>

#### b. It Fits Into the Fabric of What Precedes and What Follows

“There is a **perceptible intent to fit the new things**” into the **substance and structure of Old Testament history of redemption** as it was unfolded in history and revealed and explained in the covenants God made with His people (what God did to reveal, apply, and prophesy His redemption of the elect). To that end the nativity is connected to the house and lineage of David God’s servant in fulfillment of the covenant God made with David (Lk. 1:69, 70). In it God also fulfilled the oath (covenant) He made with Abraham, a covenant that rested on what God had spoken by the mouth of the holy prophets since the world began (i.e., including the pre-fall covenant) (Lk.

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<sup>66</sup> L. J. Coppes, *More About Jesus, vol. 1* (Providence Presbyterian Press, Thornton, 2006). See 73-75 for a detailed breakdown of these allusions.

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1:70<sup>67</sup>-72, cf., Gen. 3:15). These events represent some of the dominating epochs of the Old Testament. The chronological connection between them shows and demonstrates that **there is one dominating work of God developed throughout the history of mankind**. It argues that from the beginning that the divine purpose was to bring forth the Messiah. All of biblical history is seen as an out-working of the promise of redemption declared at the beginning with redemption coming through the seed of the woman and the curse being upon all who are aligned with and represent the serpent and his seed (Gen. 3:15).

### c. It is Redemptive

The new procedure (the incarnation and what is involved in it) described here bears a **redemptive character throughout**. This is revealed in the objective announcements by God (Matt. 1:20-21, Lk. 2:31; 1:31, 68-69, 77, 2:30), and in the way those who received these announcements understood them (e.g., Matt. 1:23, Lk. 1:31 and cf., Matt. 1:23). It is also shown in the way these divine declarations addressed man's state of sin and unworthiness with a "corresponding signature of grace and salvation."<sup>68</sup> All involved saw God's pronouncements as indicative of His acting in sovereign mercy. So Mary (Lk. 1:46, 50-53) magnified (exalted) the Lord from her inmost being (her soul and her spirit) declaring that God had shown mercy on her, had done mighty things for her, and had showed her His mighty strength, etc., while confessing her own unworthiness, being of lowly estate, weak, and spiritually hungry. There is not a trace here of self-merit or self-worthiness or self-righteousness. All is due to the mercy of God. The unworthiness of Israel is also acknowledged in these responses to God's words. These pieces of revelation set forth a recognition of the difference between the godly men (the fathers<sup>69</sup>) of old to whom were given blessings and promises and the ungodly generation of the present (the days of the nativity). This was the generation that needed to be turned

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<sup>67</sup> Luke 1:70, As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, Who *have been* since the world began.

<sup>68</sup> Vos, 330.

<sup>69</sup> Lk. 1: 17 contains an allusion to Mal. 4:6. A study of Malachi would demonstrate that Malachi is speaking about the wicked men of future Israel being turned from rebellion against God and His law (typical of Malachi's day) to the godliness of the fathers (Abraham, Moses, etc.).

back to God (Lk. 1:15, 17). “The source of all blessedness is sought in the *berith* [covenant], which is but another way of saying that it flows from the free promise of God. God fulfills what He promised to the fathers (the patriarchs) (Lk. 1:54, 55, 72, 73)”.<sup>70</sup>

d. It is Non-political

It is significant that there is **no political element** in these pieces. This is important because the Old Testament repeatedly interweaves the political and the religious. So, in itself there is no reason for the exclusion of the political. The nearest these sections approach to introducing a political element is when Zechariah prophetically speaks about being “saved from our enemies” and “delivered from the hand of our enemies” (Lk. 1:71). This element, however, is to be understood in terms of the typological speaking of the Old Testament and depicts spiritual deliverance in the typology of political terms (cf., 75, 77).<sup>71</sup>

e. It is Not Legalistic

**Jewish legalism is nowhere** in evidence. Even Pharisaical Judaism taught that legalism was a means to an end as though this were the purpose of man’s existence (the end was eternal life and entrance into the Kingdom of God) (Matt. 19:20, 23<sup>72</sup>). This bred a self-righteousness in the hope of gaining future blessedness. Indeed, the pursuit and practice of self-righteousness influenced their view of the Messianic kingdom (the future Kingdom of heaven). The main significance of this self-righteousness applied, however, to the present world, the pre-eschatological state. For the Jews Israel was to keep the law completely, then God in His grace would reward them with the appearance of the Messiah and all the blessings that were to accompany him. The divine revelation in this nativity section reverses this order. It teaches that the Messiah would appear first and then Israel will be enabled to obey the Lord and achieve the prophesied bless-

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<sup>70</sup> Vos, 330.

<sup>71</sup> Lk. 1:75, 77, “In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life. ... To give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins...”

<sup>72</sup> L. J. Coppes, *More About Jesus*, vol. 3 (Providence Presbyterian Press, Thornton, 2008), 27, 39.

ings. This results in two changes: “by shifting the law from the beginning of the process to the end the [proposed merit of] Jewish self-righteousness is eliminated; by vindicating for the law its permanent place at the end, the ethical import of the salvation is emphasized.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, Gabriel tells Zechariah that John would “turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God” (Lk. 1:16). The angel speaking to Joseph summarizes Jesus’ work as, “He will save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21).

f. It is Closely Tied to Old Testament Eschatology

This revelation is closely bonded to the Old Testament in that **two lines of eschatological prophecy** are continued in it. These two lines are: first, that Jehovah Himself would come, and second, that the Messiah would come. These two lines are not necessarily mutually exclusive in the Old Testament although various writers or prophets may have chosen to speak about only one of them. In a relatively few passages the two lines are combined (e.g., Mal. 3:1, Isa. 9:6).<sup>74</sup> For the most part, however, the two strands are kept separate. The fullness of New Testament revelation teaches that these two strands converge in the person of Jesus, but in these early nativity pieces they are kept, for the most part, separate (as was the case in the Old Testament). So, Mary and Joseph are told of the Messianic kingship extending from the line of David (Matt. 1:20; 2:1,5,8; Lk. 1:32), while Elizabeth and Zechariah are told of the coming of Yahweh (Lk. 1:16, 17, 76). This difference is not, however, carried through entirely because the Messianic and the Yahweh-coming lines are somewhat intermingled in Lk. 1:32, 69; 2:4, 11. It has been suggested that because Elizabeth as Mary’s cousin was related to the line of David (Lk. 1:5, 56), John the Baptist’s career was focused on Isa. 40, i.e., the Messianic kingship line emerges here in the Yahweh-coming line.

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<sup>73</sup> Vos, 330.

<sup>74</sup> Cf., Mal. 3:1, "Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," Says the LORD of hosts," and Isa. 9:6, 'For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'



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Moreover, the Messianic-coming line of thought might also appear intermingled into the Yahweh-coming line when the angel speaks to Zechariah about “the Lord (Jesus?) their God” (Lk. 1:16). It is even more probable that the “people prepared for the Lord” are the people prepared for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus (Lk. 1:17). Matt. 1:21 seems to combine the two lines when the angel tells Joseph that Jesus “shall save His people from their sins,” a task the Old Testament frequently assigns to Yahweh. Moreover, in this message the word Jesus seems to be understood in terms of the Hebrew spelling of the name (i.e., Joshua or Jeho-shua<sup>75</sup>). The Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), regularly renders Hebrew Joshua as Greek Jesus (e.g., Exod. 17:9). The Hebrew Joshua means, “Yahweh is salvation.” Hence, the name itself does not tell us that the one so named will be Yahweh the salvation of His people, but when applied to Jesus by the angel sent from God, it does have this meaning as the context demonstrates. “Jesus bears this name, as is explicitly stated, because He (Jesus) saves His (Jesus’) people from their sin. We have, therefore, in close succession, the statements, that Jehovah (sic) is salvation, and that Jesus saves, that Israel (Jehovah’s people) are Jesus’ people.”<sup>76</sup>

On the other hand, it is sometimes said that the name “Immanuel” (Matt. 1:23) describes Jesus’ representative function, that He *represents* God, and not His nature (that He is God). Although in Matt. 1:23 the word is part of a quote from Isaiah, it is unlikely that it appears as a merely representative descriptive. First, it is clear that in Isa. 7:14 the word in conjunction with “virgin” most certainly foretells the coming of a divine person through a supernatural conception.<sup>77</sup> Second, although the name does appear in a citation of Isaiah by Matthew, in view of its context (especially 1:21, “And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their

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<sup>75</sup> “Jeho”, a form of “Yahweh,” will save.

<sup>76</sup> Vos, 332.

<sup>77</sup> E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. I (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1965). 283-291. This is not to ignore that in Isa. 7 the reference is to a son of the prophet. Obviously, in that proximate application the designation is used with a representative connotation. However, this means that the merely human baby of the prophet did not employ the full significance of the prophecy. On the other hand, it is clear that Jesus did fill up the entire meaning of that prophecy.

sins") it seems unlikely that this section on the birth of Jesus would conclude with no more than that He represents God's presence. Third, the "representative" interpretation suggests that the final statement that is in the climactic position and that appears to set forth the climactic idea of the entire passage is anticlimactic. Surely, both Matthew the human author and God the divine author intended verse 23 to declare what the entire account works toward: Jesus is God with us. Therefore, this name does describe the nature of Jesus and not merely His office.

g. It is Universalistic in its Scope

The revelation contained in these pieces suggests that the **Gospel has universal application** insofar as its significance is not limited to the Jews. Simeon prophetically says of baby Jesus that He was, "A light to *bring* revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel." Thus, he states that Jesus' "destiny" (Lk. 2:30, 32, 34) entails universal application of both salvation and illumination. He also speaks of "the fall ... of many in Israel" and that Jesus would be "a sign which will be spoken against" and that this involves the piercing of Mary's soul. So, the salvation will be received by the Gentiles against the background of the dark unbelief of Israel. This same universalism also appears in the Old Testament with the implication of the missionary task of the church. In contrast to Simeon's prophecy, the Jews saw these Old Testament passages as being the motivation for and the prophecy of Jewish proselytizing.

h. It Presents Jesus' Supernatural Birth

The final characteristic of the Nativity revelation is the **emphasis on the supernatural birth** of the Messiah, i.e., He does not have a human father as His progenitor. Our focus here is on biblical theological issues and not on the historical and apologetic questions.<sup>78</sup> Consequently, we look to the formative ideas that appear to have been in God's mind when He authored these events (the events relating

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<sup>78</sup> See J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (Baker, Grand Rapids, second edition 1965 reprint).

specifically to the supernatural birth of Jesus). There seem to have been three elements.

First, there is the **sinlessness of the child** as a result of the special actions God undertook so that sin was not passed on to Him from His human ancestors. It is clear from the Bible that at the fall all mankind became enmeshed in sin (Psa. 51:5). It was not only Adam and Eve that “died spiritually,” but through them all mankind died, and from them spread the universal pollution of mankind.<sup>79</sup> All have been sinners from birth – except Jesus. So, the angel tells Mary, “that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God,” or “that holy thing that is begotten...” (Lk. 1:35). The point is that God is calling the child holy and that He connects this directly to His being called “the Son of God.” The implication here, when this assignment of holiness is taken in the context, is that the child will be holy just as God is holy. He is not simply consecrated (as were the tabernacle and its vessels) to divine service, but He possesses the divine attribute of holiness.

Second, in Lk. 1:32 God says that the child will be “called the **Son of the Highest.**” If this language seems to lack the pointed clarity it deserves, verse 33 reports that God said this child would not only sit on the throne of David (32) but that He will reign there forever and that His Kingdom will have no end. These words taken against the background of the explanation of the name Jesus (see above) clearly and pointedly declare the deity of this child. This matter is also pointedly connected with the work of the Spirit, described as the source of the power that will overshadow her and thus do the supernatural. Mary had not known a man in the sense that she was a virgin. How then did she conceive? The text teaches that she conceived by the overshadowing power of the Holy Spirit. It is in this sense that Jesus is earlier called the Son of God and the Son of the Highest, the Holy One. So, “no doubt is left as to the specific paternity of God being involved to the exclusion of that of man.”<sup>80</sup>

Third, the divine intention clearly seems to be that the “**supernaturalism of the whole Person and work of Christ**” is carried

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<sup>79</sup> Rom. 5:12, Gen. 3:22-25, 6:5, Psa. 14:1-14, 53:2-3, Psa. 58:3.

<sup>80</sup> Vos, 333.

**back** “into the very origin of His human nature, as derived directly from God.”<sup>81</sup> The Old Testament presents the divinely worked redemption in typological terms. One does not see God directly, personally, and bodily effecting redemption, but in view of the Old Testament and New Testament emphasis on the new covenant this advance should not surprise us. Now we are going to see salvation worked out in the Son of God. God Himself will be the actor. In the Old Testament we read of the “supernatural” birth of Isaac. This, however, is only symbolical of the coming promised son, the fulfillment of the ancient promise of Gen. 3:15. Certainly Gen. 3 teaches that Adam’s attempt to cover his sin with “girdles” or “loincloths” (as the Hebrew word signifies<sup>82</sup>) was insufficient (Gen. 3:7). In response, God covered them with tunics which were long shirt-like garments made of animal skins. Thus, God graphically and concretely tells them that their provision was inadequate both as to how much “sin” they covered, and as to the material from which the covering must come (Gen. 3:21). It takes more than a covering to remove sin. Man’s sin does not require a physical covering; it requires a spiritual atonement. It takes later revelation, of course, to make the implication of this plus Gen. 3:15 clear that the covering must come through the death of a man provided by God.<sup>83</sup>

It has been queried that if this argument as to the paternity of Jesus is valid, then why was not the maternity of Mary eliminated so that the supernatural origin and sinlessness of Jesus would be complete? The answer is that Jesus had to be truly man to be the true vicarious substitute for man. As Paul implies in Rom. 5:14, 19 since by man sin and death came it is by Man that sin and death had to be atoned. Indeed, this is precisely the force of Gen. 3:15. It was the seed of the woman who would destroy Satan and his work and through whom mankind would be redeemed and restored. By man the offense was given and by Man the offense was atoned.

## B. Revelation Connected With John the Baptist

### 1. John’s Identity: the Forerunner

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> See, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Moody Press, Chicago.

<sup>83</sup> The comments about Genesis 3 are from L. J. Coppes, *From Adam to Adam*, 160f.

## a. Unbelieving Suggestions

Who was John the Baptist? Often he is termed the “forerunner” of Jesus the Messiah sent by God to prepare the way for Him. We note that the Greek word behind “forerunner” only appears once in the Bible and that in Heb. 6:20. There it is neither applied to John the Baptist, nor does the sense in which it is used apply to him. On the other hand, the Bible clearly presents John as the one specifically sent by God to prepare the way for the person and work of Jesus the Messiah, Lk. 1:17, 76.<sup>84</sup>

Some have argued against this divinely arranged connection between Jesus and John.<sup>85</sup> For them the two men pursued separate and distinctly different ministries that developed side by side for quite a while. They “represented two separate religious movements.”<sup>86</sup> Such scholars argue their position pointing out how the Gospels do not represent the true history of things. They open their argument by asserting that the Gospel of John, which sets forth the clearest picture of John’s subservience to Jesus, is unhistorical in this matter and others. It is maintained that the large space devoted to this item arises from the apologetic intent of John the Gospel’s author. Specifically, he sought to convince the Baptist’s followers to join their efforts to those of the Christian church and to do so with words falsely put into the mouth of the Baptist. Thus, the Baptist is reported to have said, “I am not the Christ (the Messiah).” The nativity stories relating Jesus and the Baptist from before they were born, etc., are labeled as legend in the sense that such made-up stories tell of great human heroes. Hence, they are not trustworthy historical accounts. Such scholars re-

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<sup>84</sup> Lk. 1:17, “He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Lk. 1:76, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways...” Here “the Lord” refers immediately to Yahweh and is, therefore, of the Yahweh-coming line mentioned in the previous chapter, although in its greater context it is a clear reference to Jesus the Messiah as argued above.

<sup>85</sup> Vos, 335, specifically discusses Baldensperger, *The Prologue to the Fourth Gospel* (1898).

<sup>86</sup> Vos, 335.

fuse to accept the historicity of Matt. 3:13-15. This passage implies that John immediately recognized Jesus and exalted Him as the greater one. This recognition, assuming its trustworthiness, argues either for an immediate divine revelation to John or for His previous knowledge of Jesus. The two reasons offered against accepting this passage are, first, that this account is not found in Luke and, second, it runs contrary to Jn. 11:1-3. This latter passage records the exchange between Jesus and John's emissaries who seek in John's behalf to find out if Jesus truly is the promised Coming One. The gainsayers argue that Mark's account of the Baptist is the older and correct tradition when it says that Jesus' first contact with the Baptist was when He came to him to be baptized.

Still others who reject the biblical accounts of the Baptist's contacts with Jesus hold that the account of John's preaching that Jesus the one yet to come was mightier than himself, is not a direct reference to Jesus (contrary to what the context so clearly teaches), but was a reference to the coming of Yahweh Himself. It is urged that John's preaching did not involve the Messiah-coming line of prophecy. Some of those who follow this line of reasoning understand the baptism of Jesus by John as the first time Jesus was moved toward seeing Himself as a Messiah. This is an extreme step in this process of separating Jesus and John in which, "the spirit and content of the preaching of both are made of a conflicting nature."<sup>87</sup> John, they say, was looking for the political Messiah of Judaistic hope whose coming depended, *a la* the zealots, on force. On this basis, John is transformed from being Christ's forerunner into being His fore-antagonist.

In response to these nay-sayers it would be profitable to examine Matt. 11:2-19 the only apparent basis for their position (other than mere prejudice). This text helps to define John's relationship to Jesus' work. Using this passage also has the advantage of arguing from a basis that runs contrary to the thesis of these critics. Here, John is presented in a bad light whereas the contenders are arguing that the New Testament church (or whatever party authored the stories being considered) creatively authored the Gospels seeking to win over the

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<sup>87</sup> Vos, 336.

disciples of John by insulting the memory of John! So, in Matt. 11 John is presented in a bad light by the early church whereas the gain-sayers also argue that he was held in such high regard that the church was seeking to woo his disciples to join them. It also clear, that in view of what the rest of what the Gospels say about John, this rather negative report about John must have been firmly entrenched among early believers for it to be preserved.

#### b. A Prophet: More Than a Prophet

In seeking to understand the theological role of the Baptist we look especially to what Jesus teaches (according to Matt. 11:7ff.) after John's messengers left the scene.

His question, "What did you go out to see" is repeated three times (7, 8, 9). Through this rhetorical method Jesus corrects two errors and one "inadequate opinion" evidently arising in the minds of the onlookers.<sup>88</sup> Note that the question has to do with the nature of John (what) and not with his person (who). Verse 7 addresses the first error. Here, Jesus corrects the idea that John was fickle as to who Jesus was. John was not a reed shaken by the wind, i.e., his questioning Jesus did not indicate he was a man who easily changed his mind. Verse 8 addresses the crowd's second error, viz., that John's doubts were brought on by the hardships of his imprisonment. Jesus responds that John was not a man accustomed to the soft life of the rich and his doubts were not due to the fact that he was undergoing the rigors of prison life. Third, Jesus teaches that John was a prophet (9) as the crowds thought, but he was more than they conceived him to be because he was more than a prophet.

In verses 10-12 Jesus develops what He means when He describes John as **more than a prophet**. First he is a "**way-preparing messenger** sent before the face of the Lord" (10). Jesus affirms this by citing Mal. 3:1. John is the one sent by God "before your face." He is, in other words, as the context argues, *the* forerunner with reference

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<sup>88</sup> Vos, 336.

to the public ministry of Jesus.<sup>89</sup> He is the embodiment of the messenger foretold in Mal. 3:1.

Second, John is the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. In verse 11 Jesus affirms the greatness of John. He is no coward or misguided disappointed prophet. All Old Testament prophecy finds its culmination in his person and message. He stood, as it were, much closer to the actuality of the fulfillment. Hence, Jesus terms him greatest of those born of women. He is **the greatest man** since the creation. In saying this Jesus is comparing John to all those who lived under the Old Testament. He does not mean that John is greater than Jesus Himself. All the Old Testament prophets, teaches Jesus, prophesied about something future but John is declaring that thing to be coming right now. He is the Elijah who is to come immediately before the day of Yahweh appears (Mal. 4:5). Other prophets had foretold the coming of Jesus, but John was the last and greatest of them all. "The culmination of Old Testament prophecy is in him".<sup>90</sup> Thus John is the greatest as to his position in the history of redemption in his function as the immediate fore-runner of Christ, and in the fact that he was personally acquainted with the promised one. The nearness of the kingdom is set forth in verse 12 in somewhat enigmatic terms when Jesus says, "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force."

Third, Jesus emphasizes that John remained in the Old Testament age. Neither he nor his work was in the new age. Jesus says,

"Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." (Matt. 11:11)

This answer involves, by good and necessary implication, **Jesus' placing John and his message in the Old Testament era.** That idea is further strengthened by verse 12 where Jesus affirms the near-

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<sup>89</sup> The message from John addressed his relationship to Jesus, "Are you the Coming One [about whom I have been preaching], or do we look for another?" The answer of Jesus addresses this question, acknowledging that John was the great forerunner of Mal. 3:1 preparing the way for Jesus Himself (cf. Jn. 1:23).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.



ness of the promised eschatological (historically speaking) Kingdom of God (12). It has come near enough that men in anticipation are seeking to take it by force. This response arose from John's preaching that Jesus had just commended (11). It was a greatness of privilege and office that made him more than a prophet. It made him the forerunner. Jesus qualifies the greatness of John when He remarks, "he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Thus, with these remarks (11-12) He implies that John was not yet "in the kingdom of heaven." What does this mean? It certainly does not mean that John is not saved or regenerated. It certainly does not mean that John will be barred from the eternal, the eschatologically ultimate, Kingdom of heaven. What it means is clarified by verse 13, "for all the prophets and the law prophesied until John." With these words John is placed among those prophets and the law but as their better and their conclusion. He and his message belong to the Old Testament era. He was the best that era in had to offer by reason of his historical and pistic (believing) relationship to Christ but he was not a participant in the privileges of the Kingdom Jesus preached and personally represented. He continued to lead his life apart from Jesus both spatially and theologically and on the basis of the Old Testament.<sup>91</sup>

### c. An Old Testament Prophet -- An Impatient Enquirer

John's question, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" reflects **his theological attachment to the Old Testament** (Matt. 11:3). There, too, godly men queried somewhat impatiently the Lord's slowness in bringing judgment (destruction) on the wicked. This judgment aspect was the thrust of much of John's preaching. He declared that divine judgment was imminent. Men should repent immediately. John's question reveals that although his language was in terms of the coming of Yahweh, his interpretation of his own preaching was that the coming Yahweh would be the Messiah. He clearly combined the two ideas so often paralleled in the Old Testament (see above).

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<sup>91</sup> This is demonstrated by the fact that John was moved to ask the question whether Jesus was the Coming One. Also, see Acts 19:2-5

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However, Jesus to whom John pointed as the Messiah of God was not bringing judgment. Rather, He was bringing grace and salvation. This inquiry also evidences John's previous knowledge of Jesus. Indeed, it proves that there had been previous communication between them. Were there no such communication "such a message could not have been sent."<sup>92</sup> This is seen in the words "do we look for another?" John's prior knowledge of Jesus prompted him to ask the question -- John initiated this contact. Had there been no previous communication such a question could not have been sent. John's evaluation of Jesus, however, did not exceed the Old Testament perspective of a political kingdom initiated by judgment.

Now notice carefully Jesus' answer to John. Verse 5 assumes Jesus' prior knowledge of the Baptist and his message. He knows John proceeds on the basis of an Old Testament perspective. To modern readers this answer may seem strange, but Jesus knew of John's proclivity for the book of Isaiah and His response alludes to Isaiah's prophecy of Messianic blessings to be bestowed perhaps as foretold in Isa. 35:4-6. Perhaps even more to the point is Isa. 42:5-7 (also cf., 61:1) that pointedly appends a list similar to what Jesus states in Matt. 11:5 and also speaks about the agent of those blessings as a covenant to the people and a light to the Gentiles.

So, Jesus sends back a loving correction to John's understanding of how Isaiah's theology related to Jesus' ministry. Tenderly He tells him that God had used him to declare the law in anticipation of using Jesus to declare the grace (the gospel). This list of accomplishments through the ministry of Jesus displays more than His credentials, it displays the characteristics of His ministry. Jesus' words are not intended as a harsh rebuke but flow from His love for John and appreciation of his work. They are "full of love for his person on account of the generosity of John's self-effacement in the service of the Messiah."<sup>93</sup> Jesus' discourse in Matt. 11:7-19 more directly evidences His great appreciation and love for John. In the Gospel of John this

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<sup>92</sup> Vos, 338.

<sup>93</sup> Jn. 3:30, "He must increase, but I *must* decrease." Jn. 5:35, "He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light."

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love is given special grounds, viz., John's sacrificial service to the Messiah. In Jn. 3:30 John the Baptist said of Jesus, "He must increase, but I *must* decrease." On the other hand Jesus said about John, "He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light" (Jn. 5:35).

### d. An Old Testament Saint – The Question of Fasting

John's relationship to the Old Testament message and era is also indicated in Mk. 2:18-22 where the disciples of John and some disciples of the Pharisees ask Jesus why **they are led to fast** while Jesus and His disciples are led not to fast (18). Jesus replies that it is inappropriate for His disciples to fast because, in terms of His analogy, they are "friends of the bridegroom" who are enjoying the presence of the bridegroom during the wedding feast. Such an occasion is rightly marked by joy and not the sorrow of fasting. Thus he infers that the wedding feast is underway. The Old Testament era of waiting is over, and the new era of realization is upon them. John and his disciples are still in the era of waiting. They have not arrived at the wedding banquet as have the disciples of Jesus. John and his disciples remain in the Old Testament era.

### e. Elijah the Prophet

John's **mode of dress** serves as a walking advertisement that he belongs in the Old Testament era. His was the dress and lifestyle of a Nazarite. His surrounding was the desert that, in the Old Testament, is connected with the preparation for repentance.

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, Will bring her into the wilderness, And speak comfort to her. I will give her her vineyards from there, And the Valley of Achor as a door of hope; She shall sing there, As in the days of her youth, As in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt. Hos. 2:14, 15

The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God. Isa. 40:3

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Thus, he came to Israel as a living, walking sermon. He was a **reproduction of Elijah** the great prophet of repentance (Matt. 11:14, 17:10-13).

"And if you are willing to receive *it*, he is Elijah who is to come.  
Matt. 11:14

And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. "But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist. Matt. 17:10-13

Jesus' words in Matt. 11:14, "If you will receive it," imply that some questioned His identification of John with Elijah. These words also teach us that Jesus accepted John as the Elijah of God. The Jews did, however, expect Elijah to reappear but to reappear as one who had bodily returned to earth (the very same person) whereas Jesus speaks of John as one who was Elijah's reproduction (a different person with the mission foretold in Mal. 4). Hence, when the Jews pointedly asked John if he were Elijah, he said he was not (Jn. 1:21). No doubt, he would not have denied he was the symbolical Elijah, as is implied in Matt. 3:1-4.<sup>94</sup> It also appears that Mal. 4:5 that prophesies the return of Elijah might have led to the Jew's literal understanding of his return, especially, if they based their view on the Septuagint version that speaks of "Elijah the Tishbite." These same verses would argue for the antiquity of this Jewish belief. The literal return of Elijah is even more likely on the basis of Elijah's bodily ascension to heaven (2 Kings 2:11). It appears that Luke understood the symbolic significance of John's appearance when he said,

So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel. (1:80)

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<sup>94</sup> Matt. 3:1-4, "In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!' For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.'" And John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey."

f. The Old Testament Spokesman: the Forerunning of the Entire Old Testament

Thus John's forerunning personified and individualized **the fore-running of the entire Old Testament**. This is the thrust, for example, of his appearance. In addition, John was the spokesman for the entire Old Testament. He was its consummate spokesman. In him its message not only finds expression but its quintessence. Each of the three elements, covenant, law, and prophecy appears in his preaching. The covenant appears in his emphasis on the fulfillment of God's promises and in his statement that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from the stones, Matt. 3:9. In this statement John acknowledges the covenantal necessity and blessedness of the children of Abraham. The other two elements explicitly find expression in his message, "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The law appears in the command "repent." Prophecy finds expression in the declaration of the nearness of the kingdom. It is this nearness that provides a strong motivation for repentance. This is especially true because John saw the nearness in terms of judgment, viz., the winnowing fan is in the hand, and the axe is at the root.

2. John's Testimony

There were two stages in John's preaching. The first is recorded in the Synoptics and the second in the fourth Gospel. The two are separated by the baptism of Jesus by John.

a. According to the Synoptics: The Pre-baptismal Testimony

This stage is characterized by John's declarations of judgment and of the **judgment to be brought by the Coming One**. This Coming One is not termed the Messiah. Moreover, He is described in such terms that no one less than God fills them. On the other hand, He is someone other than God (Matt. 3:3,11,12; Mk. 1:3,7; Lk. 3:4,16,17). John speaks of the baptism to be done by the Coming One. According to the account in Matt. and Lk., the baptism will be done with fire and with water. Fire, no doubt, speaks of judgment. It promises the opposite of what is conceived in the term "water", i.e., cleansing and the

salvation associated with it. If this analysis is correct, John presents **judgment and salvation** as two aspects of the appearing of God's kingdom. This repeats the message of the Old Testament prophets. The language employed by John and the Gospel writers comes, as noted above, from Mal. 4 and Isa. 40.

b. The Baptism by John

(1) The Baptism in General

(a) The Source of John's Baptism

First, what is the source of John's baptism? It is clearly **the Old Testament**. This is seen in Jn. 1:19-27. In this passage what appears to have been an official investigation team from Jerusalem comes to get John's testimony as to his identity. They ask, "Who are you?" He responds to their question by denying he was the Messiah. This denial indicates what their real question was, "are you the Messiah?" We do not know how John knew this real question nor is it really important for us to know. Verse 21 records additional questions from the delegation. These questions specifically address John as to his identity with some other Old Testament messianic figures: Elijah and *the* prophet (cf., Deut. 18:18). This background illuminates verse 25 where, according to the report, the delegation from the Sanhedrin says,

And they asked him, saying, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

**Where did the Sanhedrin** gain this way of looking at baptism, viz., that there will be a baptism by a divine agent? The most likely source of their information is the Old Testament? **Twice the Lord promises to baptize (sprinkle) His people**, Ezek. 36:25, Isa. 52:15. Because the baptism is described in terms of a sprinkling it suggests there will a particular agent who will perform it. John does not contradict the idea that the messianic figures of the Old Testament will baptize. In particular he affirms that the Christ will do so and that He will do so in terms of Ezek. 36:25, viz., He will baptize with water and with the Spirit (Jn. 1:33). John's denial that He is the Christ is **a denial that His baptism is the baptism the Messiah will perform.**

Also, the Jews practiced frequent baptisms as Mk. 7:3-5 reports, *When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash.*<sup>4</sup> And there are many other things which they have received and hold, *like* the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.<sup>5</sup> Then the Sanhedrin and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?"

These verses in Greek make it clear that the washing before they eat was a baptism (Greek *baptizo*/ βαπτίζω, v. 4) as was the washing (Greek *baptizo*/ βαπτίζω) of their cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches (4). Verse 3 has a description of the act of hand washing, although it is not clearly rendered into English. The Greek reads literally "unless they wash in a fist."<sup>95</sup> On the basis, of Num. 19:4, 18, 19, 21 the Jews practiced many such ritualistic baptisms.<sup>96</sup> Admittedly, they greatly augmented the practice of the rite as is indicated in Mk. 7. These, baptisms like the ceremonial baptisms (Exod. 40:30-32), however, do not provide a sufficient antecedent for John's baptism because they were repeated in nature, while John's was a one time

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<sup>95</sup> Coppes, *The Baptism Debate* (Providence Presbyterian Press, Thornton, 2002), 18. "The Greek rendered "in a fist" refers to the special way the Jews washed (Greek *nipto* (νίπτο), *rantizo* (ραντίζω) and *baptizo* (βαπτίζω), Mk. 7:3, 4a) their hands. The only acceptable way to wash one's hands ritualistically was to make a kind of fist (by putting the ends of one's fingers together and then pointing them upward). A second person would then pour (sprinkle) water over the fists. This water had to run off one's wrists so that no filth would attach itself to the hand or fingers for only if this were done would the one eating be cleansed from pollution. This ritual achieved a ritualistic purification or a baptism. The rabbinical regulations recorded in their Talmud specify the amount of water, the time, order and niceties of these baptism-sprinklings." Cf., the Mishnah, Seder Tohoroth (purifications), tractate Yadayim (hands).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 10, "Numbers 19:13, 20 specifically says the "water of purification" is to be sprinkled. In Numbers 19:4, 18, 19, 21 there is no question that the reference is to sprinkling. The Greek Old Testament does not have *baptizo* (βαπτίζω) here but the altogether different word *rantizo* (ραντίζω). Yet when one reads of this ritual activity in the Greek translation of an ancient Jewish document, Ecclesiasticus 34:25 (c. 300-200 B.C.), the activity is represented with the Greek word *baptizo*. In other words, by 200 B.C. ritualistic ablution by sprinkling for purification could be and was rendered with *baptizo*. Furthermore, Josephus writing about A.D. 70 described this activity with the following words: 'baptizing (*baptizo*) by these ashes put into spring water, they sprinkled (*rantizo*) on the third and seventh day'.<sup>96</sup>

only baptism.<sup>97</sup> Nor can the warrant for his baptism be found in the baptisms attached to the Coming One (Ezek. 35:25, Isa. 52:15). Although the Sanhedrin saw the antecedent of John's baptism in the baptisms (sprinklings) attached to the coming of the Messiah (Ezek. 36:25, Isa. 53:15), John denied it. Some have suggested that the antecedent was Jewish proselyte baptism, but this was merely the application of the general law of purification to a specific instance. The central facet of receiving proselytes was circumcision. Without a prior circumcision, baptism meant nothing. It was insignificant. As a purification rite only had meaning at all if conjoined with circumcision. Besides, it was applied only to Gentiles who were coming from the pollution of heathenism into Judaism. If this is the background of John's baptism then he was declaring all Israel pagan. Certainly John was not telling all the Jews who came to him for baptism that they were outside the covenant or pagans. In the final analysis all of these suggestions are inadequate. So, **while the Old Testament antecedents provide information as to the significance and method of John's baptism they do not provide the direct warrant for it.**

It is evident from the accounts of John's baptisms that **he is operating within** the bounds of Judaism and that his baptism is not a declaration that he is starting a new religion. Besides, religion was regulated by the Roman authorities. The practice of unapproved religions were punishable by death. More significantly, Jewish proselyte baptisms were in no way indicative of the presence of a messianic figure. They were not seen as an indicator that the eschaton (the end day or the day of the Lord) had come. We have already seen from Jn. 1:19-27 that the Sanhedrin and John agreed that John's baptism was eschatological.

What then remains in the Old Testament to serve as a precedent and promise of John's baptism? Having eliminated all else, we come to two varieties of baptisms in the Old Testament that we offer to explain (at least in part) John's baptism. First, there is the washing (baptism) preceding and in preparation for the giving of the old cove-

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<sup>97</sup> Acts 19:3. "And he said to them, 'Into what then were you baptized?' So they said, 'Into John's baptism.'"



nant (the Mosaic covenant, cf., Exod. 19:10, 14). Admittedly, this is a washing of clothes and not of the person, but it is a washing and, hence, a baptism. To establish the assertion that this is truly a baptism we recommend that one read the four volumes by James W. Dale dealing with the Greek word for baptism (*baptizo*/βαπτίζω) recently reprinted by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company.<sup>98</sup> Second, we point to the divine promises of a great outpouring of water just before the coming of the Messiah (Isa. 1:16; 4:4; Mic. 7:19; Ezek 36:25-33; Zech. 13:1). In Biblical prophecy water is seen as a "quickening, fructifying element, besides being the instrument of cleansing,"<sup>99</sup> cf., Isa. 35:7; 41:18; 44:3ff.; Zech. 14:8. Of course, we note that John did not simply use these Old Testament "precedents" without God's express command to do so.

Indeed, John said that he was baptizing because God Himself had told him to do so. There are two Biblical passages teaching that John did not take up this practice on his own authority but was directed to do it by God (Jn. 1:33, Matt. 21:25).<sup>100</sup> It was necessary for him to be specifically directed to this practice by God because the Old Testament precedents were not commands to him. They were prophecies and types and as such required God to direct their fulfillment be undertaken.

### (b) The Significance of John's Baptism

What was the significance of John's baptism? What did it mean? To answer our question we must look to the descriptions of John's baptism in the Gospel records and to the general situation of that day.

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<sup>98</sup> J.W. Dale, *Classical Baptism* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, Phillipsburg, 1989 reprint), *Jewish Baptism* (P&R, 1991 Reprint), *Johannine Baptism* (P&R, 1993 Reprint), and *Christian and Patristic Baptism* (P&R, 1995 reprint).

<sup>99</sup> Vos, 340.

<sup>100</sup> Jn. 1:33, "I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' Matt. 21:25, "The baptism of John -- where was it from? From heaven or from men?" And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'"

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First John's baptism is described as a **baptism of repentance**. That is, it is described as a *repentance-baptism*, both a baptism *preceded* by repentance and for (εἰς, i.e., resulting in) "forgiveness of sins" (cf., Acts 2:38). Also, compare "they were baptized while confessing their sins" (Mk. 1:4,5<sup>101</sup> and Lk. 3:3). Matthew says it was "*unto* (εἰς) *repentance*" and that people were baptized "confessing their sins" (3:11<sup>102</sup>). So according to Matthew, confession of sin accompanied the baptism and repentance was its goal while according to the other two Synoptics repentance accompanied or preceded the baptism. This difference constitutes no real contradiction. The solution is clear if one understands the distinction "between a more *external* acknowledgement of sin and a *deepened, intensified* repentance"<sup>103</sup> (Matt. 3:6, 11<sup>104</sup>). Thus, the two contrasting reports describe the same thing from differing perspectives. One "kind" is the mere external acknowledgement of sin that preceded the baptism. The second "kind" is the deepened, intensified repentance that resulted from the baptism. In addition, although the Greek construction of the Mk. and Lk. report allows another understanding, it is preferable to see them (as is allowed by the Greek grammar) as talking about a "**baptism intended to produce repentance.**" Thus understood they harmonize with Matthew.

Second, this understanding of repentance as the intended and expected result of the baptism teaches us that this baptism was more than a symbol (although it was a symbol). **This baptism was a "true sacrament** intended to communicate some form of grace."<sup>105</sup> Like the other biblical sacraments John's baptism communicated grace by signifying (it was a symbol) and sealing - it was a divine act whereby the

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<sup>101</sup> Mk. 1:4-5, "John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, while confessing (according to the Greek grammar) their sins." Cf., Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit," Acts 2:38.

<sup>102</sup> Matt. 3:11, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance..."

<sup>103</sup> Vos, 341.

<sup>104</sup> Matt. 3:6, "were baptized by him in the Jordan, [while] confessing their sins." 11, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance..."

<sup>105</sup> Vos, *Ibid.*

thing already accomplished in the recipient's life experience (at least it was assumed to have occurred) was divinely verified (cf., Rom. 4:11<sup>106</sup>). They received **the sign of baptism, a seal of the forgiveness already received by grace through faith**. The sacramental understanding of John's baptism also harmonizes with Lk. 3:8 where we read that John preached, "Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance." Since repentance is involved as the expected result of the baptism, this baptism was more than a mere symbol of the repentance expressed by the ones baptized. The act when joined by true inward repentance both signified that repentance and sealed it. Insofar as the repentance preached by John was a call to return to God with the heart and with the actions, this act commanded by God through John, was part of that repentance. With this baptism God provided a concrete expression of the inward repentance and, hence, sealed the recipients in their inward act. John's baptism was a probationary act that God declared as the consummate and typical act of repentance. This should be compared to what was said about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and with Christian baptism.

Third, how can John's baptism be **distinguished from Christian baptism**? The Roman Catholic Church answers that John's baptism being still a part of the Old Testament economy was purely symbolical and that, therefore, there was no forgiveness involved in it (it was not sacramental). Many of the Protestants have argued that John's baptism is fully identical with Christian baptism.<sup>107</sup> However, John's baptism was done under the Old Testament and as an Old Testament rite. It did not convey all that is involved in Christian baptism (the significance of Christian baptism will be discussed later) but it did convey the substance of the Old Testament sacramental system. All that was implied in the rites, the offerings, the cleansing, etc., of the Levitical system is caught up in John's baptism. This entire system was intended to produce and express true repentance and faith in the God who was worshipped and in the Messiah who was to come. We see this when we compare the commands in Leviticus with the protesting

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<sup>106</sup> Cf., Rom. 4:11, Abraham "received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which *he had while still* uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them

<sup>107</sup> Vos, 342.

of God against the way Israel sometimes used them (Isa. 1:11-16, 1 Sam. 15:22, Psa. 51:26).

Finally, it should be understood that **not only John's baptism but also all the Old Testament rites are sacramental.**<sup>108</sup> In addition to the verses just noted above, many similar Old Testament verses demonstrate that the objections to this understanding of the Old Testament sacraments lack substance. John's baptism done in view of the future judgment was not done symbolizing a historically past repentance. In the Old Testament God commanded heart repentance but He also commanded act or deed repentance (doing what He said as an expression and part of repentance). The Old Testament act-repentance (Leviticus) and the heart-repentance (Isa. 1) are two aspects of man's responsibility toward God. The Old Testament rites, however, did not have the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. Such a bestowal by God upon believers in general, came in the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit and in all subsequent Christian baptisms, albeit only in the sacramental sense. If the rite is not accompanied by believing faith it is nothing (1 Cor. 10:1-11, cf., Heb. 4:1-2, 11:6, Jn. 6:63). Thus, the baptism in Jesus' name done by Jesus through His disciples, being pentecostal, is to be classified with the baptism of John as a continuation of it and not as an anticipation of Christian baptism.<sup>109</sup>

Some have objected to this view that John's baptism truly conveyed grace by arguing that John pointedly said his baptism was unlike the baptism of Jesus (Christian baptism). Jesus' baptism bestowed grace; it was the Spirit-baptism. John's was only a water baptism. So, how can John's Spirit-lacking baptism bestow and seal forgiveness? However, Jesus' baptism does more than seal forgiveness. It also seals the newness of new covenant illumination, i.e., the ability to understand with conviction the significance and reality of Jesus (cf., 1 Cor. 3:10-16; Acts 19:1-6); it seals the ability to be a wit-

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<sup>108</sup> 1 Cor. 10:18ff., "Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?" Paul goes on to argue that since one truly and sacramentally partakes of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper, he does not want a communicant to also eat idolatrous/demonic meals. "You cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons."

<sup>109</sup> Vos, 342.

ness bearer for Christ, to participate in the accomplishment of the Great Commission (cf., Acts 2). These were its unique aspects. So while John emphasized the contrast between his baptism and that of Jesus, this emphasis should not be understood absolutely so as to exclude from John's baptism the forgiveness of sin, i.e., true believer's regeneration. Similarly, some readers erroneously contrast Paul and Hebrews with the Old Testament arguing that according to the New Testament writers the Old Testament did not speak of true Christian grace.

Another line of reasoning also misunderstands and denies the sacramental significance of John's baptism. Some (the Roman Catholics) maintain that John's baptism was no more than merely symbolical. Since the Christian baptism is sacramental, John's baptism is a totally different rite. Others completely identify John's and Christian baptism. However, we have already demonstrated that John's baptism had real grace associated with it (cf., the discussion of "baptism unto repentance") but that it was a grace of the Old Testament both in its measure and quality (cf., the discussion of Matt. 11:11).

### (c) The Symbolism in John's Baptism

How or what did John's baptism symbolize, i.e., **what was the mode of his baptism?** Some argue that it symbolized Jesus' burial and resurrection and was accomplished by immersion (i.e., a total placing of the baptized person into water and immediately lifting him out). In this way the person was buried and raised from the dead. His old life was symbolically put away and he arose unto a new life of righteousness. But such a construction separates John's baptism from the Old Testament and would argue that John's **prepentecostal rite bore postpentecostal symbolism** and reality. It would symbolize and seal the reception of the Holy Spirit before the beginning of the economy/age of the Holy Spirit. It would make nonsense out of Acts 19:2, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" So they said to him, "We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." Clearly, Christian baptism involves a postpentecostal sacramental bestowal of the Holy Spirit and John's baptism did not. Also, this completely separates John's baptism from the Old Testament

precedents discussed above. It especially separates John's baptism from the prophecies in Ezek. 36 and Isa. 52. When this is done it makes the inquiries of the Sanhedrin recorded in Jn. 1 to be without any meaningful context. Finally, those who argue for the tie between John's baptism and Christian baptism do not consider carefully enough the fact that in His burial **Jesus was never lowered into grave and taken up out** of it upon His resurrection. Rather, **He was carried into a tomb** and would have walked out of it (if He did not leave it in some other way).

Speaking positively, John's baptism signifies and seals repentance and forgiveness of sin and these things so **symbolized in his baptism speak of cleansing and quickening by the Spirit**. Consequently, according to Jn. 3:25 there was a dispute between some of John's disciples and the Jews about *purification*. The dispute was taken to John but put in the form of a question about baptism, and we have already pointed out that Jewish purification was ordinarily in the form of sprinklings and pourings but not immersions. There is also a reference here to the quickening by the Holy Spirit (cf., Jn. 3:3ff.).

What was unique in the symbolism of John's baptism? The unique element in the symbolism of John's baptism was its **eschatological import**.<sup>110</sup> John's baptism, unlike any of its Old Testament counterparts was an eschatological baptism. It was a sign of the end of the Old Testament age and of the breaking in of the promised age. This is in keeping with the prophecies of the pourings and sprinklings God declared in the Old Testament (see above and compare especially Ezek. 36:26ff. and Isa. 52:15). Everybody in that day looked for the coming of the promised kingdom and its Messiah. Thus, John came in the fullness of time and at God's appointment baptized all who were willing as a seal that the day was upon them.

## (2) The Baptism of Jesus by John: Jesus Vicariously Repented and Received Forgiveness for His People, a Messianic Function

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<sup>110</sup> In the sense of the future historical and new state prophesied in the Old Testament, see p. 10 above.

This baptism should not be arbitrarily separated from the significance of biblical baptism in general (cf., Heb. 6:1). It is also important to acknowledge **that Jesus' baptism by John was a part of John's baptism of Israel in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom of God.** Hence, we must understand in what respect it was like the other baptisms. In doing this we should not deny the sinlessness of Jesus. So, the question is: how could He have been baptized unto repentance (in the sense described above) in view of His sinlessness?

The sinlessness of Jesus is maintained in Matt. 3:13-15 which shows us that Jesus' baptism differed from the other baptisms. Moreover, according to Matt. 3:13-15<sup>111</sup> John recognizes Christ's superiority and that Jesus did not need to receive this baptism unto repentance. John, the divinely appointed agent of the baptism of repentance said Jesus did not need to be baptized by him (this implies the sinlessness of Jesus), but he needed to be baptized by Jesus. **Jesus was not baptized because** He, like the others who were baptized by John, confessed His sin and repented of it. Thus, although there are certain common elements in the two baptisms (of Jesus and the others), there are also certain differences between them. Some scholars (e.g., Weiss) see the unique element in Jesus' baptism in His having emerged from the water (and the life of privacy) into a life of His public ministry. Not only does this fail to acknowledge that John's baptism was not a baptism by submersion, but it cuts the bond between Jesus' baptism and the baptism of the others (the concept of entrance into public ministry does not apply to the others).

Matt. 3:13-15 affords the answer to our question as to the **unique and common** elements between Jesus' baptism and the baptism of the others. The following truths are included in this historical account. (a) As just mentioned above, John in his protest **recognizes the "rank and character of Jesus as putting Him beyond the need for John's baptism.** (b) John's viewpoint is based on the Messianic posi-

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<sup>111</sup> Matt. 3:13-15, "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. And John *tried to* prevent Him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?' But Jesus answered and said to him, 'Permit *it to be* so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.'"

tion of Jesus. When John said "I need to be baptized by You," his words cannot be an assertion that he needs a **water baptism by Jesus for this would merely reverse their roles**. The idea of such a reversal dies in the context of John's words in verse 11,

"I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Here, John recognizes Jesus is the coming One who is to bring a baptism superior to his own, and that this is a baptism with "the Holy Spirit and fire. It is to this baptism that John looks in verse 11 and in verse 14. This is not a mere reversal of roles, but **Jesus is presented in His superior role and superior baptism**. It is a role that **necessarily entails Jesus' sinlessness**. "His confession of need to baptism by Jesus can refer to nothing else but that, and this involves the sinlessness of Jesus personally considered."<sup>112</sup> (c) Jesus endorses John's protest (with the grounds upon which it rests) when He says, "permit it to be so now." John had seen Jesus' sinfulness as necessarily excluding Him from a baptism involving repenting from sin. Jesus' words agree that John is correct in this reasoning, but implies that there are other objective reasons for this baptism to be done by John. (d) These are necessities that arise from the point in history at which they stand, "permit it for now". Thus, He implies that this was a situation that would not always exist. (e) Jesus states His reason to be, "**for us to fulfill all righteousness**." What is this righteousness? It is clearly not the perfect righteousness that God requires of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice because Jesus speaks of both of them fulfilling that righteousness. Certainly there is a reference here to what God required of Israel with regard to John's baptism. **He requires all Israelites to be baptized with that baptism. Jesus was an Israelite**, so He was required to be baptized. (f) By this act He **symbolically identified Himself with** mankind and with Israel. Just as Adam was the covenantal head of mankind and took upon himself (perhaps without fully realizing it) their destiny. So, Christ the second Adam takes upon Himself Israel's sin (yet without sin, 2 Cor. 5:21, Heb. 4:15), and identifies Himself with His people. (g) Is there not another matter that arises at this point in His ministry? A matter symbolized and sealed in the

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<sup>112</sup> Vos, 343.



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physical baptism and enacted and declared by God upon the completion of this symbol and seal. Jesus was the great high priest and every high priest **had to be anointed or ordained to his office**. Moreover he had to be ordained by a priest (Heb. 5:1). John was a priest insofar as he was the son of a priest (Zechariah) (Lk. 1:5). So, Jesus the great high priest was "anointed for (Gk. "in behalf of," ὑπέρ) men in things pertaining to God' (Heb. 5:1). God also anointed kings (1 Kgs. 1:39). So, Jesus the great King was thus anointed by the prophet John. When Jesus came up from the water the Holy Spirit descended upon, and stayed upon Him. This was the anointing by God. John's was symbolical of this anointing.<sup>113</sup>

- (2) The Accompanying Events: Jesus Personally was Anointed by the Holy Spirit to be the Messiah of Israel, a Messianic Enablement

The two significant events accompanying the baptism of Jesus are: the descent of the Spirit and the declaration from heaven as to His Sonship and Messianic office.

Let us consider God's statement from heaven with respect to Jesus' messianic office. God's statement and its immediate biblical context demonstrate that this was **not** a vision or dream or some kind of subjective communication **heard only by Jesus**. Rather, the message was heard at least by John. The words, as recorded by Matthew are, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (3:17). The message is recorded in somewhat different terms in each of the Gospels, but none of these records prove the words were heard only by Jesus. In addition, the statement by God is paralleled by other matters that are obviously objective. Note in the following biblical segments how the record moves imperceptibly from the coming up from the water, the heavens being opened, the descent of the Spirit, and the hearing of the voice of God.

It should be noted that the descent of the dove and the voice from heaven are presented in the Gospels as **objective events**. John

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<sup>113</sup> Coppes, *The Baptism Debate*, op. cit., 26ff.

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expressly testified that he saw the dove descending on Jesus (Jn. 1:32-34). If the three disciples at the Mount of Transfiguration heard the voice from heaven, and they did (2 Pet. 1:18), then it is extremely likely that John heard the heavenly voice too and so had the prophetic word confirmed. That voice spoke directly about Jesus and evidently had a **sacramental significance for Christ**. Remember John's was a true sacramental baptism. All who received it received some special grace from God (provided they received it in faith). What grace did Jesus receive personally? It was a sign and seal upon His public ministry. There are three great recorded events in which the Holy Spirit significantly influenced the life of Christ: the virgin birth, the baptism, and the crucifixion. We have already dealt with the first and the third belongs to the next division of biblical revelation (the apostolic witness). Here we shall examine the necessity and nature of the baptismal voice from heaven.

This event occurred at the beginning of Christ's public ministry and had specific bearing to that ministry. Jesus did not receive the Spirit by reason of any sinfulness in Himself. Rather, this reception and the divine message accompanying it sacramentally served as "a **pledge of the Father's approval of His mind and purpose** in submitting to the baptism, and of the effect God would give to it, when accomplished."<sup>114</sup> It is similar, in this respect, to what happens in Christian baptism. It is God's "well-done faithful servant" that comes here at the outset of Jesus' ministry and that comes to the believer after his work is done (Matt. 25:21, 23). It applied to Him what He needed in His human nature to fulfill His messianic office and task successfully. He did not receive the Spirit to improve His godliness (as an act of sanctification) but as an enabler of his human nature. Jesus **traced all** His power and grace, His words and saving acts, **to the work of the Spirit** in and through Him (Matt. 12: 28, Lk. 4:18, Acts 10:36-38<sup>115</sup>). Thus, the Spirit laid the ground for the Pentecostal out-

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<sup>114</sup> Vos, 345.

<sup>115</sup> Matt. 12:18, "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you. Lk. 4:18, "The Spirit of the LORD *is* upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to *the* poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to *the* captives and recovery of sight to *the* blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed." Acts 10:16-18, "The word which *God* sent to the children of Israel,

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pouring and all the subsequent anointings (baptisms) because that Pentecostal outpouring was dependant on the finished work of Christ. So, Jn. 1:33 records the divine message, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'<sup>116</sup> That Holy Spirit baptism was, above all, what occurred at Pentecost, as were all the bestowals of the Spirit thereafter. It is Jesus who brings to us salvation and sanctification and He does this by baptizing us with the Holy Spirit.

There is a **difference** between Jesus' anointing with the Holy Spirit and what happened to the Old Testament prophets. Unlike those former prophets, **Jesus received the Holy Spirit, not just a partial portion** of Him. The Bible makes it clear that Jesus, in contrast, received the Holy Spirit without measure (Jn. 3:34) and received Him as a **permanent endowment** (Jn. 1:33). Lk. 3:22 conveys this idea of the totality and undivided nature of the divine gift when it reports, "the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him." The report of Matthew and Mark does not clearly state that the entire and undivided Spirit descended on Jesus because their words may simply be understood as figurative, i.e., the Spirit descended *like/as* a dove, but John removes all doubt as to what happened. However, what is said in Matt. and Mk. does imply that there was a permanent effect in this Holy Spirit descent. The prophetic anointings with the Holy Spirit were abrupt and did not result in a continuing indwelling by the Spirit. Jesus, on the other hand, saw His entire life in word and deed sanctified and directed by the Holy Spirit. There is no truly good explanation as to why the dove was used in God's anointing of Jesus. There is no Old Testament antecedent. The closest analogy is the fig-

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preaching peace through Jesus Christ -- He is Lord of all -- that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him."

<sup>116</sup> It has been suggested that this relationship between the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus and at Pentecost might be why the Greek of John 1:33 is so unusual when it says the Holy Spirit was to be seen "resting upon" Jesus (the Greek uses the word "*epi/ επι*"). This emphasizes the permanence of Spirit's resting. Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe the effect of the Holy Spirit with the preposition "*eis*" (*εις*). So, they emphasize the coming of the Holy Spirit using a construction signifying His "approach to" or "entrance into" Jesus.

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ure at the opening of the creation where we are told that the Spirit of God hovered (like a large bird) over the face of the waters (the unformed substance from which the entire material creation was formed) in order to bring forth organization (form) and life. If this analogy is accepted then one might see in the baptismal dove the idea that the work of Jesus constitutes a second creation that is bound to the first creation through the similar action of the Spirit.

### c. According to the Gospel of John: the Post-baptismal Testimony of John

The material of this section is found in the Gospel according to John and may be discussed in three subdivisions consisting of three Johannine declarations.

#### (1) Jn. 1:15, 30, the Three Stage Ministry of Jesus

First, we point to John's statements in Jn. 1:15, 30.<sup>117</sup> All agree these words speak of two stages of Jesus' ministry: what He did before John and what He did after John. Indeed, the words speak of three stages of Jesus' ministry. In order of appearance they are: the stage after John (first clause: He who comes after me), the stage in the Old Testament before John (clause two: existed before me), and the eternal stage (third clause: for He was before me).

There is an ongoing discussion as to **the significance of the second clause** in Jn. 1:15, "is preferred before me." The NKJ renders this second clause "who is preferred before me" presenting this clause to speak of their relative ranking. But this rendering appears suspect because this clause is preceded and followed by clauses referring to time ("comes after me," and "was before me"). Perhaps the translators are trying to remove a possible difficulty if the second clause were also rendered as a reference to time, because then it might seem that the second and third clauses say the same thing making the verse some-

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<sup>117</sup> Jn. 1:15, "John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, 'This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.'" Jn. 1:30, "This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.'"

what nonsensical. But note that although the English translation of the second and third clauses may sound alike, what the Greek says presents them as quite different. The deciding words of the two clauses are quite different in Greek both as to how they are written and what they signify. The middle clause tells us that Jesus preceded John in the sphere of becoming or appearing upon the historical scene. The third clause tells us that Jesus absolutely preceded John in the sphere of existence. In an attempt to express this difference we suggest that the middle clause might be paraphrased "**he came into existence as a creature before me.**" Similarly, we suggest paraphrasing the third clause as, "**he existed outside of time before me.**" Hence, we are taught that "in Christ's eternal existence before time lays the possibility of his appearance and activity under the Old Testament."<sup>118</sup>

This sentiment is reflected in **Mal. 3:1**,<sup>119</sup> for example, where **the prophet sets forth three stages in the historical eschatological order.** First, there is the earthly stage. He refers to the "messenger" who "will prepare the way before Me," and "the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come." This historical allusion finds fulfillment in John the Baptist (the preparer), and the ministry of Jesus (the Me in, "he will prepare the way before Me"). John said, "after me comes a Man (for whom I am preparing the way" (Jn. 1:30). Second, Mal. 3:1 also calls the Lord (before whom the messenger is to prepare the way) "the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight." This is a reference to the One appearing as the "Angel of the Lord" whose appearances are sometimes so described as to make it clear in such instances that the reference is to the pre-incarnate Jesus. Gen. 16:10-13 expressly says that the Angel of the Lord spoke to Sarah, and that it was the Lord (Yahweh) who spoke to her. Gen. 31:11ff. Jacob says that the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and that He identified Himself as the God of Israel. This person who is God Himself and yet is not God and who appears in an incarnate form most certainly is Jesus. So, we conclude that Malachi speaks of the pre-nativity Jesus and of His pre-nativity ministry when he speaks of the messenger of

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<sup>118</sup> Vos, 347

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. Mal. 3:1, "'Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,' Says the LORD of hosts."

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the Lord. That is, he speaks of the ministry of Jesus throughout the Old Testament period. Third, Malachi prophesies that the "Lord ... will suddenly come to His temple ... even the Messenger." The construction clearly identifies the Lord and the Messenger (angel<sup>120</sup>). There is some debate as to this particular translation of Mal. 3:1 but even if Malachi is speaking about two different figures (God and the Messenger of the covenant) the Baptist's preaching at points virtually identified God and the Messiah (the Coming One). We have already discussed this phenomenon in which the Old Testament prophetic line of Yahweh-coming and the line of the Messiah-coming are at times brought together as one figure both in the Old Testament and especially in the New Testament. "If the one coming after John as to time of ministry was actually like both Jehovah and the Angel, then John could truly declare, "He was before me," in the most absolute sense."<sup>121</sup>

### (2) Jn. 1:29, 36, the Atoning Ministry of Jesus

The second distinctive post-baptismal teaching of John about Jesus is his declaration of the atoning ministry of Jesus. This emphasis is seen in John's statements recorded in Jn. 1:29 and 36.<sup>122</sup>

#### (a) Jesus is a Vicarious Sin-Bearer

The designation applied to Jesus, "**the Lamb of God,**" is the same in substance in both verses, but the first designation is fuller. Verse 29 brings forth **the vicarious atonement**, the **sin bearing of Christ**, viz., He will efficaciously bear the sins of others. This theological teaching is not especially emphasized in John's Gospel. On the other hand, we already noted above that this sentiment appears after the baptism of Jesus by John as recorded in Matt. 3:14-15.<sup>123</sup> If Jesus' baptism was a vicarious baptism for His people and John understood

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<sup>120</sup> In Hebrew the same word means messenger and angel.

<sup>121</sup> Vos, 348.

<sup>122</sup> Jn. 1:29, "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Jn. 1:36, "And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God!"

<sup>123</sup> Matt. 3:14-15, "And John *tried to prevent Him*, saying, 'I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?' But Jesus answered and said to him, 'Permit *it to be so now*, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he allowed Him."

this then it follows quite naturally that later he would describe Jesus in terms of being the vicarious sacrifice for His people. These words (Jn. 1:29) then are John's commentary on what happened at the baptism of Jesus.

(b) Jesus is the Sacrificial Lamb Depicted in Isa. 53

Whether or not John interpreted Jesus' baptism in terms of a vicarious act by the time he made the statements recorded in Jn. 1:29 and 36, he saw Jesus in terms of a vicarious sacrifice. John obviously is influenced by the Old Testament in making this description of Jesus. The Old Testament has **two pictures** of a sacrificial lamb. One is given in **Leviticus** and the other in **Isaiah**. The first is a lamb (*probotos*, the Greek-Jewish word for a sacrificial lamb) given in fulfillment of the terms of a **guilt or trespass offering**. It does not, in the symbolism of the Old Testament sacrificial system, fully represent the great atonement. Indeed, in order of spiritual significance it is an offering of the third degree. This means that it is at least three steps removed from carrying the full significance of the atonement. The prophetic lamb (*amnos*) is presented in terms of a guilt/trespass offering but has the added weight of being an **offering of the first degree and more**. Its work exceeds that of any Levitical sacrifice in that its work is accomplished once for all. This is the image employed in Isa. 53:5-10. Moreover, there are several other possible antecedents for the designation John gives Jesus, i.e., "the lamb of God."<sup>124</sup> There are certain aspects of what John says that would lead one to any of the suggested antecedents, but since all of the suggested antecedents have strong reasons why they might be present in John's allusion it might be that he did what God does elsewhere in the New Testament, i.e., he has in mind a combination of the several figures.

However, it may be well to focus especially on **Isaiah's lamb**.

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<sup>124</sup> For a fuller discussion see Coppes, *Daddy May I Take Communion? Paedocommunion vs. The Bible* (Providence Presbyterian Press, Thornton, Co, 1968), 182-188. The following possibilities are discussed as to the Old Testament antecedents for John 1:29: the daily burnet offering, the atonement goats (that took away Israel's sin), the Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7), the conquering lamb of later Jewish apocalypticism, the lamb of Isa. 53:7.

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The mention of the lamb in Isa. 53:7 does not directly introduce a particular Levitical offering. Rather, it symbolizes “innocence, meekness, and willingness to render vicarious service for the people through suffering and death.”<sup>125</sup> This figure is contrasted to the people who are described as a straying wandering flock (6). Hence the lamb stands in strong contrast to the flock and serves as a good figure of the one who is to bear the sin of the people. The lamb is both **fitted and willing to bear the sin of others**, “He opened not His mouth” (7). Verse 10 introduces the idea of a sacrifice rite. Rather surprisingly He is called not just an offering for sin, but a **guilt-offering**. Only in the guilt-offering are the ideas of debt and restitution introduced into the kind of offerings to be made. Thus, the Servant not only atones for the sin (covers it over and blots it out) but He makes good the obligation owed to God by His people. This recalls the graphic act whereby the offerer lays his hands on the head of the offering and thus figuratively the offering becomes the sin-bearer. It is thought that these ideas now expressed in Jn. 1:29 were in the Baptist’s mind as he accepted Jesus as a baptismal candidate or perhaps as he thought over the baptism and what Jesus had said. Jesus in His baptism took upon Himself to act as a representative of the people. Now the Baptist here in 1:29 makes it clear that it was not all people whose sin Jesus took upon Himself, but **only those whose sins were laid** upon Him. He is their guilt offering. The word rendered “takes away” may mean to destroy something or to bear it to another place. In either case, the intent of the Baptist’s statement is clear (especially when seen against the background of Isa. 53). This is the lamb who will stand in the place of sinners, take their sin upon Himself, He will bear their guilt and their penalty, and **He will justify the many** (11) (53:4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12). We also note that Isaiah speaks of the lamb as bearing the sin of Israel and its penalty so that Israel will not be judged for their sin (they are justified), while John in Jn. 1:29 speaks of the lamb that takes away the sin of **the world**. Some have urged that John is using “world” to speak of those Jews who were of the world (qualitatively) rather than of all kinds of people in contrast to the Jews alone (quantitatively). In response, one needs to keep in mind Isa. 52:15, “So shall He sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths at Him; for what had not

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<sup>125</sup> Vos, 349.



been told them they shall see, and what they had not heard they shall consider." This verse, usually understood as part of the same Servant of the Lord song concluded in chapter 53, clearly speaks of a universal ministry (quantitatively) of the coming Servant.

(3) Jn. 1:34, Jesus is the Eternal Son of God

The third distinctive post-baptismal teaching of John about Jesus is his **official declaration that Jesus is the eternal Son of God**, Jn. 1:34.<sup>126</sup> The words "I have seen and testified" declare the Baptist's faithfulness in responding with a witness concerning the significance of the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus. The descent is what he had seen. His words imply that as soon as he saw he bore witness. He uses an emphatic construction in this statement, viz., "I myself". This usage tells us both that he was an eyewitness and that he was an official witness. His witness was official because he was the one sent from God to be the forerunner, to prepare the way for the coming of Yahweh, etc. The phrase "Son of God" has several connotations in the Bible. We will not take the time to deal in detail with each meaning. Some of these connotations are: nativistic (Christ is the Son of God by virtue of the way He was conceived), adoption (Christ became the Son of God in the same sense all believers become the sons of God), official (Christ is the Son of God in the same sense that the officers in Israel are called the sons of God), regal (Christ is the Son of God in the same sense as the kings of Israel are called the sons of God), messianic (Christ is the Son of God in the sense that He is the consummate and eschatological King), moral (Christ is the Son of God insofar as He faithfully kept the law of God), and eternal (Christ is the Son of God in His essential being). The final meaning is seen in John's testimony that Jesus is the Son of God, Jn. 20:31.

But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.

With these words the Evangelist declares his purpose for writing the Gospel of John: to create belief in the eternal Son of God. To this end he chose a number of incidents in Christ's life that demonstrate and il-

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<sup>126</sup> Jn. 1:34, "And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."

illustrate his message. Hence, the report of John the Baptist is the first in a series of these incidents. So here the Baptist's testimony culminates in this testimony regarding Jesus' Sonship. If it is offered by the Evangelist (and the Holy Spirit) as proof of Christ's eternal Sonship, it must be a reference to that eternal Sonship. This "eternal" interpretation of the Baptist's witness is confirmed by the significance of the Baptist's first statement.

(4) Jn. 3:27-36

This passage may be divided into two sections, 27-30 and 31-36. It is generally agreed that the Baptist is the speaker in the first section, but the speaker of the second section is debated. This brings us to a consideration of the first section.

(a) Verses 27-30, Jesus is the Messiah, John is Not<sup>127</sup>

The occasion described in this first piece is a dispute between the Baptist's disciples and some Jews. The disciples address their master with the substance of the dispute, viz., Jesus is more popular than the Baptist. Their problem is not Jesus' popularity but that He is becoming a rival to the Baptist. Indeed, a rival in what was formerly and formally, no doubt, the Baptist's own field of endeavor, i.e., he had been the most popular baptizer (26). Their report was factually correct (cf., 4:2). Why would this be a problem to them? Could it be that they were not clear on John's role as the forerunner but saw John as the Christ/Messiah? The Baptist exposes the absurdity of this debate about a rivalry between himself and Jesus. John's response constitutes an unequivocal reaffirmation that he is not the Messiah but Jesus is. John points to the absurdity of his disciples seeing Jesus as a rival. The points of his response are: 1. John's ministry is not from himself but from God and so is Jesus' (27). In essence they both serve the

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<sup>127</sup> Jn. 3:27-30, "John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. <sup>28</sup> You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' <sup>29</sup> He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. <sup>30</sup> He must increase, but I *must* decrease."

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same Master and pursue the same goal. 2. John is not the Christ, but the forerunner (28). With these words he implies that Jesus is the Christ as he so clearly stated in the three statements examined above. 3. John rejoices in the ministry of Jesus because Jesus is the bridegroom and John only the friend of the bridegroom (the master of ceremonies at a wedding). So, John's joy is full (29). It is not only his role to point to Jesus not to himself, but it is his function to decrease and to see Jesus increase. "He must increase, I must decrease" (30)

### (b) Verses 31-36, Jesus is the Divine Son of God

It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether John the Baptist or John the Evangelist is the speaker of these verses.<sup>128</sup> Hence, we present them with this question undecided. In this regard we note that some elements here clearly recall what John has said previously (see above).

These verses set forth the summation of John's testimony concerning Jesus. There are several elements of this summary:

1. Christ comes to earth from heaven, "He ... comes from above.
2. The heavenly existence of Christ, He "is above all."
3. His knowledge of heavenly things is an experiential knowledge, what He speaks of "He has seen and heard." His is a divine knowledge, the kind of knowledge God alone has.
4. Christ is to be identified with God Himself, so that to hear Him is to "certify ... that God is true." He who receives with conviction what Jesus says receives with conviction the reality that God is true, viz., that truth is an essential characteristic of God.<sup>129</sup> Hence, what Jesus says bears this same characteristic. Indeed, when Jesus speaks it is God Himself who is speaking.

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<sup>128</sup> Jn. 3:31-36, "He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. <sup>32</sup> And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. <sup>33</sup> He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true. <sup>34</sup> For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure. <sup>35</sup> The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand. <sup>36</sup> He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

<sup>129</sup> For a discussion of the sense of "true," Greek *alethinos* (alhqinoj), see p. 91.

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5. Christ has absolute and divine authority in the area of revelation, He "speaks the words of God."

6. Yet no one receives His word as the very word of God (32-33).

7. Jesus speaks the word of God in way that no other divine messenger has ever spoken. He has received the Spirit without measure. This certainly implies that the Spirit is divine and that because no man can receive the Spirit without measure (due to man's sinfulness), it implies that Jesus in His human nature is sinless.

8. The Father has given all things to Jesus, His divine Son. Indeed, He has turned over the rule to Him: the Father "has given all things into His hand."

9. Faith in Christ involves having eternal life. Faith in Him, in His person and office (as just set forth), is accompanied by eternal life. This kind of faith also is tantamount to obedience to the Son, so that faith without obedience (works) is death not life. Not to have eternal life is to live under the wrath of God.

### C. Revelation in the Probation of Jesus

To some the account of "the temptation of Jesus" may appear to be out of place in an account of Christ's public ministry. However, a thoughtful reading of the account demonstrates that it fits very well in the context of Gospel history. Others find it difficult to make such connections and may even doubt its historicity and objectivity. Various attempts to explain it come from such doubters.

Some have offered what has been called a mythological understanding of the temptation. To them the temptation is no more than a story created by its authors arising from the idea that a personal confrontation between the Messiah and the devil is essential to the eschatological drama (relating to the end times prophesied in the Old Testament). Because such a story is essential to the eschatological interpretation of history, it must have happened to Jesus if He truly is the Messiah. Consequently, this is a made-up story. Jesus personally had nothing to do with its origin or shape. Mythology provided the structure of the story and the Old Testament provided its concrete features.

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Others have offered what has been termed a parabolic theory of the origin of this story. This position is less radical than the previous position. It proposes the idea that Jesus originated the story. Initially, it consisted of parables like the other parables in the Gospels insofar as they set forth a truth by way of an illustration. So, Jesus told “parables” to His disciples as a means to explain to them an awareness of the many temptations that He faced, or would face, during His ministry. The disciples misunderstood what He taught them and changed His teaching into this single account of an historical event.

Matt. 12:29, however, provides evidence that this temptation was no mere story or myth but an historical account.<sup>130</sup> In this parable Jesus distinguishes between disabling the strong man (entering his home and binding him) and plundering his goods. The former act makes it possible to do something and the last act is the consequence. According to verses 26-27 the plundering of the goods, in Jesus’ case, consists of casting out demons. Thus, the strong man who is plundered must refer to the one to whom the demons belong. The New Testament consistently identifies the demons as belonging to Satan, i.e., they are his subjects. Jesus does not explicitly refer to His temptation in this parable, but He does clearly imply it was the binding of Satan. Also, since it supplies His response to the charge that He was casting out demons by the power of the devil (a historical act), there must be something concrete (a historical act) behind this parable. That historical act occurred early in His public ministry before He began to cast out demons (to actually accomplish the end proposed in the parable).

The parabolic interpretation argues that this story teaches that a man must first conquer evil within himself before he can attack it outside of himself. This, however, simply does not fit the thrust of this “parable.” Entering into a strong man’s house does not aptly picture one’s falling into temptation. Entering a house is much more direct and active than “falling” into temptation. This particular parabolic explanation involves Jesus’ facing repeated temptations (moral battles)

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<sup>130</sup> Matt. 12:29, "Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house."

within Himself before He could reap the fruits of victory. This view then is in serious danger of denying the sinlessness of Jesus.

This parable also argues not only for the historicity of the temptation, but also for its objectivity (that it occurred in history). Not all historical events occur objectively, i.e., are corporeally perceptible. “An encounter between persons, especially in the supersensual world [the world of feelings and emotions], can be perfectly objective without necessarily entering into the sphere of the corporeally perceptible.”<sup>131</sup> That this binding of Satan was an objective event is established by the objectivity of its results, viz., the casting out of demons. So, if the effect is objective, it follows that the cause is also objective. Many moderns argue that there is no such thing as demons, but it is clear that Jesus considered the demons as real supernatural beings who could be spoken to, who gave responses, and who exercised a wide range of powers in the real world. To classify all this as an expression of mere superstition or psychological derangement is to do so on the basis of intellectual bias and on the supposition that what we cannot see or experience does not exist in the real world. On such a basis, one might argue against the existence of atoms or even the existence of logic.

This Matt. 12 passage reveals other matters concerning the temptation of Jesus. Jesus is charged with casting out demons by the power of Satan (Beelzebub). He responds by saying that the power behind His acts is the Spirit of God (28). Another reason for the mention of the Spirit at this point is to underline the role of the Spirit in His public life and ministry. The Spirit is mentioned repeatedly in the accounts of the temptation. Matthew tells us that Jesus was led up into the wilderness by the Spirit (4:1). According to Mark, Jesus was “driven” into the wilderness by the Spirit (1:12), and Luke writes that Jesus “being filled with the Holy Spirit ... was led by the Spirit into the wilderness” (4:2). From this emphasis we learn two things. First, that this was the work of the Holy Spirit in Christ’s Messianic office. Matthew and Mark pointedly report that immediately after His baptism He was led or driven into the wilderness to face the temptation. This tells us

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<sup>131</sup> Vos, 356.

that the Spirit began His work in Jesus immediately after settling upon Him. It was this same Spirit who enabled Him to cast out demons. This demonstrates that the temptation was “the execution of a definite programme (sic) in its first beginning.”<sup>132</sup>

Secondly, such actions by the Spirit show that behind it all stood God Himself. This teaches that the temptation was not only an act of Satan, but also an act of God as He was carrying out a positive Messianic purpose. The Devil’s intent in all of this was to lead Jesus into sin. It was a temptation. God’s intent was that Jesus, like Adam before Him, would face a probationary testing. This was not merely an experience for Jesus. Through it He not only passed through a testing without loss, and demonstrated His sinlessness, but He procured a positive gain. Mark’s saying that the Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to face the temptation does not argue that He was unwilling and unresponsive to the Spirit’s leading. Rather, this wording “drove” speaks of the powerful action of the Spirit to which Jesus responded willingly, and of the divine commitment to carry out this probation.

The temptation of Jesus compares to the temptation of Adam reported in Gen. 3. Like Adam Jesus faced a double-sided purpose (temptation by Satan and probation by God). In view of this comparison it seems that Luke had a comparison between Adam and Christ in mind when he traced His genealogy back to Adam (Matthew did not do this in the genealogy he presented) and added immediately after that genealogy the record of this temptation of the second Adam.

One must acknowledge that what happened to Jesus was not simply a repetition of Adam’s testing. Adam faced Satan with a clean slate. He had not sinned and was not acting against the background of the sin of others. In contrast, Jesus who also had not personally sinned, faced the trial with the sin of all mankind since Adam upon His shoulders, and with the goal of gaining eternal life for His chosen people. The clearest biblical explanation of this thesis is presented by

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<sup>132</sup> Vos, 357.

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Paul in Rom. 5, especially verse 15.<sup>133</sup> Here, Adam is called a type of Christ who was to come. It is specifically noted that what Christ did was not like what Adam did for by Adam's sin many died whereas by Christ's act many were blessed. There is also implied in His probation a connection with His atoning work in removing the sin of His people (the many, 5:15, 19). Because the atonement is implied here there needed to be, and was, "an element of suffering and humiliation on our behalf, and not merely the exertion of a strenuous will for obedience."<sup>134</sup>

Another difference between the temptation of Jesus and ours is that merely being tempted does not mean special humiliation for us because we already have sin in our hearts and thus are already humiliated. Jesus, however, had to face temptation even though He was sinless. He had to humble Himself to do so and was humiliated by Satan's arguments seeking to lead Him to sin.

There is, indeed, a comparison between Christ's temptation and ours. Heb. 4:15 reports that Jesus was tempted similarly to us but He did not, as a result, sin. Thus, note that this was a real temptation (in the sense of a testing) for Christ, and that "He was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). So, Heb. 4:14 tells us, "For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted." However, in the comparison there is a major difference, He did not sin.<sup>135</sup>

Now we point out that this probation of Jesus **undergirds His subsequent redemptive work**. Satan intended for Jesus to sin. Hence, the event is properly termed a "temptation." God, however, designed the event with the intention of Jesus moving to a higher plane. So, it is properly termed a probation. This biblical relationship

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<sup>133</sup> Rom. 5:14-15, "Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. But the free gift *is* not like the offense. For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many."

<sup>134</sup> Vos, 359.

<sup>135</sup> Also, the writer of Hebrews has in mind the temptation attached to His passion and not the temptation that occurred at the beginning of His ministry (Heb. 5:7-9).



**demonstrates by anticipation** the fruit of Jesus' work (the higher level). He will overcome. He will accomplish the task assigned to Him. The casting out of demons is part of the result arising from His successfully sustaining the probation. Here we see the principle of "anticipated fruition" insofar as the casting out demons was an outworking of the probation, but was only as it were the first-fruit thereof. In the fourth Gospel this principle (His triumph over Satan) occurs frequently, and the same principle appears in the Synoptics, although not as often. Some might be tempted to see this casting demons out as a miniscule part of Jesus' ministry, and perhaps as too small and insignificant to term it the first-fruit of His Messianic work, but it was neither small nor insignificant to Jesus. He saw it as the **arrival of the Kingdom of God** (Matt. 12:28, Lk. 11:20<sup>136</sup>). So, John preached that the kingdom "is at hand," Matt. 3:2,<sup>137</sup> and Jesus preached that the kingdom was "is at hand."<sup>138</sup> However, though they used the same words, they did not mean the same thing. For John the tree was blossomed while for Jesus the fruit had appeared but was not fully ripe. For John the Kingdom's arrival was close, whereas for Jesus the Kingdom was already present. John's words were of the Old Testament era and Jesus' words were of the New Testament era. Also, all three Synoptics bring out the antithesis between Satan's kingdom and God's Kingdom "where the former goes, the latter *ipso facto* [by virtue of that fact] rushes in".<sup>139</sup>

What specific form did the temptation/probation take? Was the temptation focused specifically on His Messiahship or was it focused on His humanity apart from that Messianic office? The first two temptations are aimed pointedly to His Messianic office insofar as Satan opens with the words, "If You are the Son of God" (Matt. 4:3, 6; Lk. 4:3; 4:9). No such words appear in the third temptation probably because it was a temptation to idolatry and such wording would appear to be out of place. Thus, **the temptations are Messianic**. On the

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<sup>136</sup> Matt. 12:28, "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you." Lk. 11:20, "But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you."

<sup>137</sup> Matt. 3:2, "and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

<sup>138</sup> Matt.4:17, "From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" Cf., Matt. 10:7.

<sup>139</sup> Vos, 359.

other hand, **Jesus' answers proceed from a human perspective:** 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.'" (Lk. 4:4), "Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve'" (Lk. 4:8\*, and "Jesus answered and said to him, 'It has been said, "You shall not tempt the LORD your God."'" (Lk. 4:12). There is a counter-pointedness to the tempter's' wording and Jesus' reply. The Devil mentions His divine Messiahship and Jesus seems to purposefully refuse to exercise His prerogatives, to submit to the lordship of Satan.

So, "how can Messiahship and submission to the ethical obligations of common human conduct go together?"<sup>140</sup> Does not Messiahship exempt Him from certain restrictions binding ordinary men? As Messiah, Jesus would have been sinless, at least abstractly, if he had turned stones into bread. He would be exercising His sovereign control of nature instead of submitting to its limitations. During this period of probation Jesus was truly the divine Messiah, but He was **purposefully submitting Himself to conducting Himself like a man**. During this phase of His Messianic ministry He submitted Himself in humility and service **to His Father's will**, after this He would enter a more exalted state in which doing some of the various temptations now offered to Him would constitute no sin. At this point, doing them would constitute sin because **by following the Devil's suggestions** Jesus would move out of this temporary state of service to God and the accompanying humiliation. He had to pass through this present state at God's direction, and He willingly submitted Himself to that direction. He refused to follow Satan's suggestions and leap over this preliminary phase. He submitted Himself to a state similar to "the condition and experience of a suffering man under God."<sup>141</sup> Satan tempted Him to act in keeping with His deity but Jesus while repeatedly stressing what a man ought to do "repudiates such self-exaltation." It is important to note that Jesus responds to Satan by citing from the Old Testament Law of Moses. It is as though through the use of the Law in response to Satan that Jesus is stressing the real matter at issue, viz., His humiliation in actively submitting to the lordship of God

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<sup>140</sup> Vos, 360.

<sup>141</sup> Vos, 361.

and refusing to follow the lordship of Satan by exercising the prerogatives of deity at His command.

In the **first** temptation Jesus responded to Satan with the words of Deut. 8:3, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'" (Matt. 4:4). With these words Yahweh reminds Israel that His feeding them with manna was intended to teach them that He was able to feed them apart from the use of natural means. These words do not present a contrast between food supplied by means of the Word of God and food supplied by natural means. The experience of the Jews would not lend itself to this teaching for God supplied them both with natural and revelatory food. However, Jesus applies the true meaning of this Old Testament passage to Himself very much like it applied to the Jews of old. The Holy Spirit had brought Jesus to this situation where He had fasted forty days. In Deut. 8:2 Yahweh reminds Israel that the historical context of the words of 8:3 are that God had brought them into the wilderness to humble and test them. So, Jesus acknowledges that the Spirit had brought Him into the wilderness to humble and test Him. So, the probation of Jesus was **a test to see if He would exercise complete trust in God the Father, the One able to sustain His life in spite of the extended fast.** The words "proceeds from the mouth of God" refer 'to the miracle-working word of omnipotence, the mere word requiring no natural means.'<sup>142</sup> So, Jesus reveals to Satan that God intended for Him to continue in "faith" and He now was doing so. This involved at this point of Jesus' life, more than simply endurance under the trial of suffering (passive obedience); it involved "the inner spirit of submission to God" (active obedience). So, the issue is not only what extent of suffering He could or should endure but also even more how He should bear it. His task and commitment was to work through this painful test experientially, all the while remaining completely committed to the Father even though, from a human point of view, the whole thing might be difficult to figure out. He was tempted, then, **to abandon the plan of God, and not to live under** the fact that "all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). He was tempted **to abandon**

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<sup>142</sup> Vos, 352.

**His faith** in the Father who had placed Him in a state of humiliation and to assume an attitude and action of independent sovereignty. Note that the temptation was not the suffering of great hunger but the danger of starvation as His quotation of Deuteronomy expresses it, “Man shall not live by bread alone.” Thus, both Matthew and Mark report that after the temptation concluded the angels came and ministered to Him (Matt. 4:11, Mk. 1:13).

In understanding the **second** temptation, we again note that the key to its significance lays in Jesus’ answer, “You shall not tempt the LORD your God” (Matt. 4:7, Lk. 4:12). This is a citation from Deut. 6:16 that adds “as you tempted Him in Massah”. The incident at Massah is described in Exod. 17 (also cf., Deut. 9:22, 33:8). To “tempt” God signifies to “**prove**” Him, i.e., to put Him to test, to experiment, to see whether He really had the power to lead them to Canaan. This test rose out of their **feeling of doubt** or even of unbelief. Later the Massah incident was referred to as the typical example of the sin of **unbelief** (Psa. 95:8, Heb. 3 and 4). So, the Lord implies that casting Himself from the pinnacle of the Temple was tantamount to a testing of the Father and would in principle be the same as the sinful act of the murmuring Israelites of old. To some it might appear that Jesus’ jumping off the pinnacle would be an act of faith in which He would put His trust in the Father’s ability and willingness to save Him. In reality, however, as the citation argues, it would be a sinful act involving His abandonment of God’s plan for His life. “It would involve an impious experimenting with the dependability of God.” **If He submitted to Satan’s temptation, then from this point** on His sense of safety would depend on this demonstration /experiment rather than on the promise of God. Thus His answer meant, “You shall not make experiments with Yahweh, your God.”<sup>143</sup> This second temptation lies beside the first where the issue was safety from starvation while here the issue is protection from outside danger.

The **third** temptation has **two distinguishing features**. First, it proposes an open act of sin while in the other two the act of sin is disguised. Second, now Satan steps forward clearly unmasking his self-

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<sup>143</sup> Vos, 363

#### REVELATION SETTING FORTH THE PROLOGUE

interest where in the first two he presents himself as a disinterested spectator seeking to be of genuine help to Jesus. It is curious that in this third temptation Satan, having been rebuffed twice, makes such an undisguised attempt to lure Jesus from His commitment to the Father's plan. Nonetheless, he now clearly sets forth his intent in the whole temptation. He said to Jesus, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me" (Matt. 4:9). With these words he pointedly places before Jesus the issue as to **who would be God in His life**, Yahweh or Satan, and **whether Jesus would be Yahweh's Messiah or Satan's**. This is the thrust of the "if" and the promise that he would give Jesus "all these things." Thus the two acts, falling down and worshipping the Devil are actually one sinful act of yielding allegiance to Satan. Hence, Jesus' somewhat curt dismissal of the tempter, "Away with you, Satan," and the direct identification and rejection of the proposed idolatry by referring to Deut. 6:13-14<sup>144</sup>, "For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve' " (Matt. 4:10).

Several points may be raised to demonstrate that Satan's bold thrust in this last temptation is "up to a certain point intelligible, if not intelligent."<sup>145</sup> It may be that he was counting on the suddenness and unexpected timing of this attack, the element of surprise. Perhaps by attacking in this way, Jesus, he thought, would be caught off guard and respond rashly and "reach for the golden ring" (the grand prize) and do so without the suffering and humiliation of the rest of His human life and crucifixion. Then, too, this might be an appeal to Jesus' religious nature, a nature He held in common with all men. Thus he offers Jesus a pseudo-religion. A religion that would allow Jesus' "**fulfillment**" of His religious inclinations without the difficulties of worshipping the Lord God. Jesus was led to be like Israel of old who so often rebelled against the Law of God in favor of a false religion. A religion filled with many of the same outward religious practices plus some matters that were not so ethereal and difficult for man. The true religion of worshipping God in spirit and truth would be

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<sup>144</sup> Deut. 6:13-14, "You shall fear the LORD your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in His name. You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are all around you."

<sup>145</sup> Vos, 364.

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replaced with worshipping with idols and things you can see. Such a religion would have the freedom of self-made religion. However, Jesus knew that true religion, God revealed religion, is not religion in the abstract. It is worship and service of the Lord God in the terms He has set forth in the revelation He has given mankind in the Bible. Thus, Jesus' answer includes, "the Lord God, and Him alone."

There are two additional matters that warrant discussion: whether Jesus was truly able to be tempted (His temptability), and whether He was able to sin (His peccability).

How could He be **tempted**? This question arises because in order for someone to be tempted to sin involves, it would seem, some imperfection. Thus, God and the saints in heaven cannot be tempted. They cannot be attracted to sin. Historically, however, both the first Adam and the second Adam, Jesus, were tempted. This entrance of temptation alone did not imply the presence of sin. The means by which the temptation was set forth, in both cases, was not in itself sinful. They experienced sin when they succumbed to the means but not until they succumbed. The asking for them to do something sinful and their receiving that asking was not in itself sinful for them. Their hearing the words of the tempter and observing and understanding those words and the acts set before them was, on their part, innocent of all sin. The issue is set before us when we understand that the knowledge of something sinful is not sinful. A temptation is no temptation unless the person with that knowledge is drawn to do what is divinely forbidden. So, how could the preference of submitting to what God forbids over against "obeying the divine will be contemplated for a moment by the mind of a sinless person?"<sup>146</sup> With reference to Jesus there is no clear answer except that God, in the Bible, teaches us that He was tempted "yet without sin."<sup>147</sup> "The double mystery, therefore, that as to the **temptability**, and that as to the **peccability** of the Saviour (sic), here appears as one in its root, and we simply must confess our inability to throw light on it."<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Vos, 366.

<sup>147</sup> Heb. 4:15, "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are*, yet without sin."

<sup>148</sup> Vos, 366.

Thus, we have seen that Satan's attack was extremely subtle in all its parts (it was intelligent). He demonstrated a profound insight into the battle he was waging, the issues at stake, and the strategy best pursued. He attacked in each case a central pivotal question aimed at destroying the divine plan of redemption. This pivotal point was, as pointed out above, Jesus' "absolute and resolute adherence to the principle of humiliation and suffering as the only road to victory and glory."<sup>149</sup> There can be no doubt that he carried out his nefarious plan with sinister satisfaction. Any sin would have sufficed to achieve his goal, but his attack was aimed at the heart and essence of Jesus' Messianic task.

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<sup>149</sup> Vos, 367.





## Chapter 4. THE REVELATION OF JESUS' PUBLIC MINISTRY

### I. GENERAL REMARKS

#### A. Limitation of Content by Jesus

Jesus limited the content of His teaching (in word and deed). He did His part of the whole of God's revelation presupposing what had already been revealed in the Old Testament and what would be revealed subsequently through the New Testament apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). Hence, as one through whom God delivered divine revelation in Old Testament times He is called a prophet,<sup>150</sup> and as one through whom God was to work after the resurrection and ascension to further the Kingdom of God, He is called an apostle (Heb. 3:1, Eph. 2:20<sup>151</sup>). In accomplishing His mission during His life here on the earth Jesus humbled Himself to work within the framework of His humanity. He limited the method, delivery and content of His teaching. Such limitations were voluntary and did not change His divine nature. Throughout His earthly walk He remained eternal God. And as is reflected repeatedly in the Gospel records, He could and did resume His divine prerogatives at will. When He appears as limited in knowledge (or power), this did not result from any lack of knowledge on His part but merely from the fact that He temporarily set aside His omniscience (or omnipotence) and submitted Himself to God's plan and procedure with reference to His Messianic life and mission. Also,

“Although He possessed the fullness of the divine truth within Himself, and could have let it shine out through His subjectivity, yet He forbore doing this, adjusting Himself to the process of which He

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<sup>150</sup> 1 Pet. 1:10-11, “Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace *that would come* to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ, who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.”

<sup>151</sup> Heb. 3:1, “Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus...” Eph. 2:19-20, “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief *cornerstone*”

was the acme and center, a process requiring both preparation and following up.”<sup>152</sup>

Thus, His self-limitations did not change in any way His ability to do all things as God the second person of the Trinity.

The teaching of Christ (revelation in word and deed) necessarily involves the redemption He accomplished. If we did not have knowledge of what Jesus taught and did in consummating our redemption, our knowledge would be woefully inadequate.

The revelation administered and accomplished by Jesus may be viewed under four divisions.<sup>153</sup>

(1) It may be seen as natural revelation and general revelation. This means one may view, as part of His revelatory work, what He accomplished in the creation as a participant in the initial creation<sup>154</sup> and organization of all things, and as His working by means of providence in which He upholds and administers all things (Jn. 1:3, Eph. 3:9, Col. 1:16-17).<sup>155</sup>

(2) The next subdivision of His teaching is His work in the Old Testament. This segment of His revelatory work is seen primarily in the revelation delivered by the Old Testament writers and others who served to deliver God's heavenly message. According to Heb. 1:1 God in time past spoke through the prophets. In the verses that follow the writer of Hebrews cites some of those through whom God

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<sup>152</sup> Vos, 368.

<sup>153</sup> Vos, 369.

<sup>154</sup> Jesus' work as creator: Jn. 1:3, "All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made." Jn. 1:9, "That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world." Rom. 1:20, "For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse." Eph. 3:9, "...and to make all see what *is* the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ." Col. 1:16-17, "For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist."

<sup>155</sup> Jesus upholds and administers all things: Col 1:17, "And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist." Rev. 4:11, "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created." Acts 17:28, "...for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'"

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spoke words (messages): cf., Deut. (1:5, cf., Deut. 32:43 [LXX]), 2 Sam. (1:4, cf., 2 Sam. 7:14), Isa. (1:13, cf., Isa. 8:17), and Psa. (1:3, cf., Psa. 2). Thus, every section of the Old Testament has a reference under the heading "prophets,"<sup>156</sup> and according to 1 Pet. 1:11, it was the Spirit of Christ who testified through them. In addition, one must note the revelation through Christ as the person designated as the "Angel of the Lord."

(3) His public ministry during His walk on earth and as set forth in the New Testament.

(4) The revelation He mediated through those whom He chose, i.e., the New Testament apostles and prophets.<sup>157</sup>

In regard to this four-fold revelatory working of Christ, one might merely cite Jn. 1:1-14 as a proof text (In the previous paragraph some of the proof texts proffered are from Jn. 1.) Certainly verse 1 when compared with verse 9,<sup>158</sup> teaches that Jesus the Word was with God in the beginning as the Word. The context teaches that this Word functions as a revelatory Word and did so from the beginning of the creation. In verses 4-9 the functioning of this Word is traced from His being the bearer of life. Just as God has life in Himself, so does the Word. In verses 5 and 6 the thought expands the function of the Word moving it from being the source of life for men to being the light of men, the source of knowledge and understanding (cf., 9). In verse 5 the condition of unregenerate mankind is described as darkness and we learn that the Word that shined from the beginning of creation by virtue of the fact that He is and was inherently the light, shined in the darkness, now shines in the darkness, and, by good and necessary reasoning will ever shine in the darkness. Verse 5 adds that the Word

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<sup>156</sup> Lk. 24:44, "...that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and *the* Prophets and *the* Psalms concerning Me." Matt. 5:17, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill."

<sup>157</sup> 1 Cor. 14:37, "If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord." 1 Cor. 7:40, "But she is happier if she remains as she is, according to my judgment -- and I think I also have the Spirit of God." Eph. 2:20, "...having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone..."

<sup>158</sup> Jn. 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Jn. 1:9, "That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world."

that illuminated the darkness generally speaking (of all mankind since the fall) was not comprehended (some render "overcome" in the sense of the light being put out) by unregenerate mankind, who are the ones who dwell in darkness. Whether one understands the text to "comprehended" or "put out" makes little difference for our point. In either case, the Word's illumination has become something intelligible to man. It is quite obvious that here it takes on the connotation of a message to be understood and received (cf., 7). "His own" (verse 11) are those to whom the incarnate Word came and who rejected Him. This group is contrasted with the "world" (10) that did not know Him. Hence, we are taught that in the Old Testament age there was a general revelation that came through the Word to all mankind, and that they rejected it. When He came to His own (11) they too, as a group, rejected Him (did not receive or believe in Him), but there were those who received Him and to them He gave the right to become the children of God (12). Therefore we have been taught that Christ reveals the truth through general revelation (the creation and the conscience of men, cf., Rom 1 and 2). That is, Christ the Word was the great revealer of all that was revealed to men from the foundation of the world including all that was revealed to the people of God (His own) from the world's foundation and all that is recorded in the Old Testament. We also learn that the Word became flesh (14) and thus was the revelation to, and the One who revealed the truth to Israel, both the Israel according to the flesh (1 Cor. 10:18) and the Israel according to the Spirit (faith).<sup>159</sup> He was God (1) and became man (14) and displayed the glory of His person (14).<sup>160</sup> Wherever there is darkness the light, the Word, shines. Wherever there is revelation, whether general or special, it stems from or, in the case of the revelation "in *His* Son" (Heb. 1:1), it is Jesus in His person, words and works.

At this point, we turn to consider more carefully the mode of reve-

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<sup>159</sup> Rom. 9:6-8, "But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they *are* not all Israel who *are* of Israel, nor *are they* all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, 'In Isaac your seed shall be called.' That is, those who *are* the children of the flesh, these *are* not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed.

<sup>160</sup> Jn. 14:9, "Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father?'"

lation in the Gospels. In this respect, we acknowledge that there are “two aspects of manners” in this block of revelation.<sup>161</sup> These are the revelation in and through what He was (nature-revelation) and revelation in and through what He taught (speech-revelation). The idea that He revealed, and often duplicated, God in what He was necessarily implies that He was God as to His nature. These two modes were not always separated in practice. Although the character-revelation might be communicated with deeds alone, it was not always communicated without words. Often it was the words (speech-revelation) of Jesus that unveiled His divine nature. His speech-revelation revealed both His own nature and character and the nature and character of the one He duplicated (God the Father). Significantly, it is not the exclusiveness the two modes of revelation viewed as character-revelation and word-revelation that distinguishes them but they are distinguished by the fact that in nature-revelation His duplication of deity plays a more prominent role.

The third division of Christ’s revelatory work consists of what He did and was in His earthly ministry between His birth and His resurrection. Interestingly, while the Synoptic Gospels and the fourth Gospel teach the same truths they differ in their perspective. The Synoptics present the teaching of Jesus from an **objective orientation**, as if the reader were an observer, and primarily in the form of **works-revelation**. They speak more of matters that are objectively set forth such as the Kingdom of God and righteousness. This is not to say that such matters are presented as if detached from God (in a purely objective manner), on the contrary, they are attached to God personally and the reader (or speaker) is drawn into things religiously and spiritually. The focus is also on the revealed content by God, **speech-revelation**. Revealed knowledge is set forth as what is needed for salvation. Merely having such knowledge does not produce salvation, but salvation does not normally come apart from such knowledge. To this end consider Matt. 7:21ff. where although salvation comes by grace apart from works, yet it is emphasized that salvation is never apart from works (cf., Matt. 11:27-30). In other words, that which saves is grace and it is grace alone by means of which one is moved to embrace the

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<sup>161</sup> Vos, 371.

gospel through faith working in love (Matt. 22:37-38). There are also repeated references to the Holy Spirit as the One through whom Christ does all His works and reveals His message.

The fourth Gospel presents revelation from a more **subjective perspective**. It has more revelation in the realm of nature-revelation whereby Christ Himself (His nature) is the matter revealed. Its focus is more the person of Jesus than on His words and works, although this latter is not ignored. This is evidenced in the emphasis on His preexistence in heaven. Indeed, this preexistence is set forth repeatedly as His high qualification as the source of revelation (1:51, 3:2, 5:30, 8:38). Closely related with this is a focus, both implicitly and explicitly, on His uninterrupted coexistence with the Father. Also, knowledge of things revealed is not simply an objective matter to be learned, it is what effects real spiritual change (regeneration) in the hearer, i.e., provided it is a divinely delivered knowledge (Jn. 6:14, 14:17). The knowledge thus delivered is personal. It is the difference between meeting someone by means of letters and the knowledge that results from not only personally meeting someone but having a history of interaction with them. It is the difference between seeing a picture of someone one does not know personally, and seeing the picture of someone known and loved. This matter is mentioned in the Synoptics (cf., Matt. 11:27), but it is emphasized in the fourth Gospel. The divine attributes are seen as focused in Christ. Thus, He is the "light," "life," "truth," etc. and His words are "life" and "truth." The Synoptics speak of the Holy Spirit with the focus on the Spirit as the enabler of Christ. In the fourth Gospel the indwelling Spirit qualifies Christ to confer the Spirit on others. He is the One who will baptize with the Spirit and is pictured as doing that very thing (Jn. 3:1-8, 6:63). In addition, the Spirit is yet to "come" after Christ's departure and as the One through whom and by whom the disciples, Christ's successors, would be enabled as the vehicles of divine revelation (Jn. 16:13).

## B. The Question of Development

At this point, we turn to the public ministry of Christ as such. The question before us now is whether there is development in that ministry.

We ask the question first as to any possible development in the mind of Christ. It surely seems that given the fact that Christ was truly human and, therefore, experienced growth and development both physically and mentally, that one should allow, in principle, the possibility of such development. However, such an allowance applies only to His private life before the onset of His public ministry (Lk. 2:49-52). So although there probably was such development with respect to His human development, there is no biblical evidence with which to describe and trace it.

Second, with regard to the possibility of growth and development in His teaching presentation (objective development) during His public ministry, there is some evidence of such growth, but that growth was limited to certain areas. One cannot properly trace any growth or change (subjective development) in Jesus that proceeds from error (in whole or in part) to truth. Jesus was deity from conception and with that deity came the knowledge of all truth. We are correct to maintain that prior to His public ministry there was no time when He gave up that omniscience so as to cease being deity. No doubt, the child Jesus had to learn many things even though all knowledge was at His disposal (He existed in the "form" of God and was equal to God, Phil. 2:6) yet He came in the likeness of men (was truly human) and humbled Himself. Part of His incarnational living was that He laid aside the exercise of His divine prerogatives and lived as a man (yet without sin). In His divine nature He always had access to and possession of all knowledge which knowledge He willingly set aside when He deemed it useful or necessary, while in his human nature He was limited to whatever He (in His divine nature) designed.

At no time, did He exhibit sinning or error in religious or other matters (subjective development). "It needs no pointing out that where this is [denied], both the presence of the divine nature in the Person (*ibid*) of Jesus and the infallibility of His human nature have been in principle abandoned."<sup>162</sup> He may, as to His human nature, have pro-

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<sup>162</sup> Vos, 374. Since such "abandonment" is contrary to the theology of the Bible *per se*, it arises from a theology read into the text.

gressed from partial to more complete and more adequate understanding of the truth but not from holding religious and spiritual error to holding religious and spiritual truth. So, one may allow that there was "subjective development" in Jesus' perception of the truth, although this remains unproven. On the other hand objective development, development in presentation, is not only allowed in principle, but can be demonstrate in actuality.

Also, He may have spoken in terms of the then held "scientific" truths and even passed them on without correction much as a parent explains matters to a young child all the while knowing much more than what is said. Moreover, Jesus knowing that in the absolute sense the smallest seed in existence is not the mustard seed yet, while speaking to those whose knowledge was thus limited, spoke of the smallest seed they knew as the smallest seed (Matt. 13:31-32). Such adjustments when speaking to His audience merely means that He spoke in terms they understood for the sake of clear communication and without pronouncing eternal scientific truths that they would not have understood. When He does this there is no intent to claim that He spoke in absolute terms. When He spoke of religious truths, however, He spoke in eternal absolute truths even when His audience could not understand (Matt. 13:13), although even here He did not tell all that He knew. Thus, He molded His speech (His revelation) to terms men could apprehend (Deut. 30:11-14).

### C. Method of Jesus' Teaching

The previous discussion allowing for objective development in the teaching and presentation of Jesus, leads us to a consideration of the method of Jesus' teaching. It is clear from the Gospel records that Jesus adjusted His presentation to the situation in which He found Himself; at least this is the way it is presented in the Gospels. A comparison of the Synoptics and the Gospel of John shows that the Holy Spirit presented the public ministry differently in the two bodies of material. There should be no question here of which is true because they are both true. It is only a question of what does God teach us.



One may best get at the matter of the method of Jesus' teaching by noting what is absent in it. More precisely, Jesus' teaching lacks a "systematizing, doctrinally-cohesive presentation of truth." His teaching method may be contrasted, for example, with that of the Apostle Paul. Paul's teaching is not set forth in a systematic theological format, but its presentation is certainly more systematic and organized than the teaching of Jesus. The teaching of the Jews of Jesus' time as represented in the Gospel records and reflective of Mishnaic teaching was certainly more systematically formatted than that of Jesus. One must also note, however, that the then-current Jewish teaching was, "from a theological point of view, shallow, and contained more flagrant inconsistencies than Paul's teaching has ever been charged with."<sup>163</sup> Nowhere in Jesus' recorded teaching is there anything that approaches a definition of any subject such as occurs, for example, in Paul and his near-definition of the Kingdom of God (Rom. 14:17). Also, Paul, in Romans, for example, sets forth a rather systematic presentation of total depravity, justification by grace through faith, etc.

What Jesus' teaching lacks in systematic presentation it makes up in "the concrete, imaginative way of handling principles for illustration's sake."<sup>164</sup> Jesus employed a consciously "comparative" way of speaking. He used several forms in the course of this way of speaking. In our discussion we seek to talk in terms of biblical usage. The generic name for the form of such comparative speaking is "parables," Matt. 13:34-35, 15:15, Mk. 4:33. But, for clarity's sake, it is better to use this of a specific form. The simplest form of Jesus' illustrative teaching is simile or metaphor. The simile is a comparison between two things using "like" or "as" or that draws the comparison indirectly, e.g., "He is like a man building a house," Lk. 6:48. A metaphor, however uses no comparative word but draws the comparison more directly, "go tell that fox," Lk. 13:32. Parable, narrowly conceived, likens not single things one to the other, but some relation between certain items to some relation between other items.

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<sup>163</sup> Vos, 375.

<sup>164</sup> Vos.

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Jesus' parables may be divided into three groups: similitudes, parables proper and specialization parables.<sup>165</sup> Similitudes set forth similarities between ever recurring processes or sequences in nature and sequences in the redemptive world, cf., the parable of the fig tree in Matt. 24:32ff. In the second group, parables proper, the teaching is clothed in the form of a story, cf., the parable of the vineyard, Matt. 21:33ff. Such parables picture an ever-recurring process as a single event, cf., the parable of the sower, Matt. 13:3ff. These "story" parables are to be distinguished from fables in several particulars. Fable uses animals, parables human beings, as their central figures. The animals of fables act contrary to the ordinary conduct of such animals, the persons of the parables act like human beings, i.e., in keeping with the nature of their character. The animals of fables take on a semi-comical character, an element entirely absent in our Lord's parables. The irony Jesus sometimes used should not be confused with comedy. In specialization parables a lesson or principle instead of being abstractly described, is placed before us in a single instance of its working. An example of this kind of parable is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector going to the temple to pray, Lk. 18:10ff.

In Jesus' teaching there is some use of allegorical elements. An allegory is a teaching form in which not only a single (or a few) major lessons are set forth but in which every detail is intended to illustrate the comparison. If one, for example, interprets the parable of the prodigal son as an allegory then one concludes that those (or some of those) who are saved are originally God's but that they wander off, live an irresolute life apart from the Lord, and then come back to the Lord when things get really bad. That is, the parable does not teach simply the joy of God when anyone is truly born again, but it teaches a typical pattern for those who are saved. Being saved (in God's household), they depart to live a life of sin while God patiently remains inactive and does not bring them back. This is hardly the picture of things presented elsewhere in the Gospels.

Because of the dangers and exegetical excesses arising from viewing the parables as allegories some have insisted that proper ex-

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<sup>165</sup> Vos. 376-377.

egesis of parables sees only one lesson in a parable. Others have gone so far as to declare all possible allegorical elements as not part of the original text (spurious). However, Jesus' teaching carries a creativity, freshness and originality that defy both of these analyses. He did not pursue the working out of modern literary rhetorical or poetical categories. Moreover, the Gospels illustrate this freedom of expression wherein allegorical elements are employed by Jesus, cf., the parable of the bridegroom (Mk. 2:19-20), the parable of the wedding banquet (Matt. 22:2-14), etc. Then, too, the Gospels record parables in which there are potential allegorical elements but which are intentionally ignored in Jesus' interpretation, e.g., the parable of the unjust judge (Lk. 8:6-8), and the parable of the ten bridesmaids (Matt. 25:1-13). One should always keep in mind that, "our Lord's parabolic teaching bears all the signs of unpremeditation and instantaneousness of utterance."<sup>166</sup>

One might query the reasoning behind Jesus' use of parables, or the philosophy of parabolic teaching. Three major benefits of His parabolic teaching method have been pointed out. He used this method to render the truth more vivid through putting it in concrete form, to intercept prejudice (an illustration invests a principle with a degree of innocence while the straight forward statement of the principle is more likely to stir objection), and to veil the truth (Matt. 13:13-16).

Theologically speaking, the parables were more than rhetorical devices, and might be seen as spiritual discoveries. They are discoveries because they set forth certain parallelism(s) between the two aspects of creation, the natural and the spiritual (redemptive). These relationships are part of what God has constituted by His creation and providence. Prior to Jesus these relationships had not been recorded in prophetic history, even if others had been privileged to see them. In the parables we are shown spiritual laws reflected in the natural world (Psa. 78:2). Jesus was able to see all this because He "had been the divine Mediator in bringing this world with all its furnishings into being, and again was the divine Mediator for producing and establishing the

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<sup>166</sup> Vos, 379.

order of redemption.”<sup>167</sup> This is the underlying theological reality of His parabolic teaching. Thus, the heavenly realities precede and have copies in the earthly realities. Both aspects of reality, the eternal and the created, are equally real.

Although the Gospel of John records few parables,<sup>168</sup> it does embrace this theological correspondence of the eternal and the created. The great contrast between these two realms of reality is reflected in the following verbal terms: “earth” and its opposite “heaven,” “world” in the phrase “not of this world,” “the earthly things” and its opposite “the heavenly things,” and “the things beneath” and its opposite “the things above.” Here too, this fundamental relationship entails the teaching that the heavenly things take precedence in concept and preeminence. The higher sphere is the focus and goal of all true religious thinking and striving. “Hence the ‘supernaturalism’ of Jesus’ Gospel and of His Person, as determining that of the Gospel finds most pointed expression in John; one might call it the anti-evolutionistic document in the Scriptures, *par excellence*, so far as ethics and religion are concerned (8:23).”<sup>169</sup>

The difference between these two realms is not conceived in Platonic terms, i.e., as if the eternal realm is more real than the earthly realm, because both are seen as equally real. As a result, each realm is called true, but different and related words are used of each realm, viz., *alethinos*/αληθινος and *alethes*/αληθης. The first is used of the eternal uncreated sphere and the second of the temporal created sphere. The first speaks of the realm of intrinsic truth, that which is true in an ultimate sense, in an eternal sense. It is qualitatively superior to all that is created. The second word describes that which is true in a secondary derived sense. In other words, it is analogical (as this word is used by Dr. Cornelius Van Til<sup>170</sup>). It is qualitatively lower than the first. Hence, the first higher idea appears in Jn. 1:9 where the Word is termed the *true (alethinos)* light, “that embodiment of the quali-

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<sup>167</sup> Vos, 380.

<sup>168</sup> Vos. Examples of Johannine parables appear in 3:8, 11:9-10, 12:24, 13:10, and 16:21.

<sup>169</sup> Vos, 381.

<sup>170</sup> Coppes, *The Divine Days of Creation* (Providence Presbyterian Press, Thornton), 2004, 217

ty of light of which all other lights in the world are but copies and derivatives."<sup>171</sup> Similarly, Jesus says in Jn. 14:6, "I am the way, the truth (*alethinος*) and the life." This heavenly higher *alethinosity* is incarnated, condensed and incorporated in the divine Logos. He is the truth not "because He is veracious and reliable, but simply, because He has the reality of heaven in Himself."<sup>172</sup> This idea is also caught in Jesus' description of the "true bread," "My Father gives you the true (*alethinος*) bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world," Jn. 6:32,33. Thus, the eternal uncreated sphere consists, as it were, of *alethinities*.

The second word for truth, *alethes*, bears the sense of veracious in the connotation of not involving anything that is a lie or partakes of the nature of a lie, as in Jn. 3:33, "He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true." In Jn. 3:20-21 the "true" is used of that which is "morally good." Here, doing evil and doing the truth are opposites.

Our philosophical inquiry illumines several other texts that, in turn, provide further insight into the theology of Jesus. First, consider Jn. 1:17, "For the law was given through Moses, *but* grace and truth (*alethinος*) came through Jesus Christ." This does not mean that the law did not contain the truth. Rather, it teaches that the law did not bring "that full disclosure of the heavenly reality in Jesus Christ, which is the 'truth'."<sup>173</sup> The law did not contain the antitypical revelation, but consisted of shadows and types. What it revealed was not "false," but it was simply not heaven on earth. It was not the final and full revelation from God as was the teaching and person of Jesus. Second, look at Jn. 4:23, "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth (*alethinος*); for the Father is seeking such to worship Him." Jesus is not speaking about sincerity in worship even though it is clear from the Gospel record that neither the Jews nor the Samaritans were sincere in their worship. Indeed, even if they were sincere the truth (*alethinος*) is found in neither religious practice. It is not found in Judaism and Samaritan worship

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<sup>171</sup> Vos, 381. Also, cf., Jn. 6:32, 33 15:1, 17:1

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 382

unless and until they transcended the typological forms in time, place and ceremony. Rather, Jesus speaks of a new worship that corresponds in an unshadowy and direct manner to the heavenly original of God, who is Spirit.<sup>174</sup> This is not to equate Jewish and Samaritan worship in all respects, so Jesus says, “You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews.” Third, consider Jn. 14:6, “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, the truth (*alethinos*), and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me’.” This is Jesus’ opening sentence in response to Thomas’ question, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?” In its context in John, the question actually queries the way to get to heaven. So, Jesus says that He is the way adding the explanation in the words “truth,” and “life.” In Him are present both the heavenly substance and the heavenly life. How does one come to the Father (to the heavenly reality in God)? He comes to it by being savingly related to Jesus and thus coming to possess the heavenly life.

This idea of the heavenly *alethinities* also appears in Hebrews where the author describes Jesus as “a Minister of the sanctuary and true (*alethinos*) tabernacle.” The only Gospel mention of our concept outside of John appears in Lk. 16:11, “who will commit to your trust the true (*alethinos*) riches?”

#### D. Attitude toward the Old Testament

Speaking in terms of the unfolding of divine revelation, i.e., from the perspective of biblical theology, Jesus held to the inerrancy of the Old Testament just as do modern day reformed scholars who uphold the traditional reformed view (such as set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith). He maintained its authority, truthfulness and value even as to its smallest parts (jots and tittles<sup>175</sup>) just as we Protestants currently do when we identify it as God’s inerrant/infallible word. Thus, Jesus said, “it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fail,” Lk. 16:17. He upheld its authority, truthfulness and value in passages such as Jn. 10:35, where

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<sup>174</sup> Vos, 282.

<sup>175</sup> Jot is an anglicized spelling for the smallest Hebrew letter, the *yodh*, and *tittle* refers to the smallest marks distinguishing some Hebrew letters.

He remarked that, “the Scripture cannot be broken.” However, in His day Jesus was not unique in holding this high view of the Old Testament insofar as it was also upheld by the Jews of that day. Jesus, of course, was the “most orthodox of the orthodox” in this regard.<sup>176</sup> The teachings of Jesus set forth what has been called a Bible religion (albeit sometimes spoken sarcastically). Christ’s adherence to the Old Testament is witnessed in His teaching, of course. He derived much material from it and maintained that His teaching was in strict conformity to it (cf., Matt. 5:17-20).

There is an aspect of Jesus’ teaching that was truly unique to Him. Like many in His day and today He viewed the entire Old Testament history and content as divinely directed and inspired, but unlike any other mere human being He regarded, and correctly so, the Old Testament history and revelation as having achieved its goal in Himself. “He was the confirmation and consummation of the Old Testament in His own Person.”<sup>177</sup>

Jesus’ dependence on, use, and respect of the Old Testament is seen in several aspects of His teaching. First, His speaking is full of words, phrases, and forms of expression derived from the Old Testament. Second, Jesus treats the Scriptures as a “rule of faith and practice.” Consequently He charged the Pharisees with substituting their tradition for what the Scripture says (Matt. 15:36). Third, He “authenticates His own Messianic character and work by pointing [to them as] the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy” (cf., Mk. 9:12, 12:10, 14:21,27,49, Lk. 4:17-19, 22:37, 24:25-27, Jn. 3:14, 5:46). In such passages He teaches that the Scripture must be fulfilled because it is Scripture, i.e., Scripture cannot be broken (Jn. 10:35). Ultimately, of course, there is no immediate power in Scripture *per se*, rather, it is the power behind the Scripture that necessitates its fulfillment, i.e., it must be fulfilled because it sets forth the mind and purpose of God. Jesus appeals both to the letter (the details) of what is in the Old Testament and to its organic expression, i.e., its theological significance and teaching. In applying Old Testament laws He did not hesitate to

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<sup>176</sup> Vos, 383.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

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take into account the progressive nature of divine revelation. This is especially evidenced, for example, in His political teaching, i.e., He did not advocate rebellion against Caesar, but taught that under the conditions of His day Caesar (godless heathen government) had a legitimacy that must be acknowledged (Matt. 22:21).<sup>178</sup> Also, Jesus did not employ an allegorical method of interpreting the Old Testament in His updating. He employed the Scripture in a simple and straightforward manner. Today this is sometimes called the historical grammatical approach (hermeneutic). Indeed, Jesus may be seen as a defender of those who strive to make the Scripture understandable to the unlearned and non-technical student. In His hands the Scripture was an open book for the common people. In this regard, He stands out when compared to the Pharisees and Sadducees whose use of technical argumentation (complex logic) and tradition made it difficult for the common person to understand what the Bible taught. Their attitude is seen in Jn. 7:49, "But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed."

Fourth, while all the previous points rest on what is implied in Jesus' teaching, He also speaks directly of the authority of the Old Testament Scripture. In Lk. 16:29-31, for example, Jesus teaches that the Old Testament (Moses and the prophets) carries as much supernatural validity and authority as would be carried by someone who came back from death to witness to the truth of the Gospel. Also, in Jn. 5:37-29<sup>179</sup> Jesus condemns the Jews for not hearing the voice of God in Jesus' words or in the Old Testament both of which attest authoritatively to the eternal life in Jesus. Thus, the Jews reject the authority of God and His Bible.

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<sup>178</sup> Jesus recognized what the Westminster Confession of Faith, 19.4 terms the "general equity" of the "judicial laws." In the Old Testament under Moses, God was the King of Israel and to ask for any other King was to reject God (1 Sam. 8:7). On the other hand, once there was a human king, Israel was to submit to that king (1 Sam. 24:6). The Law of Moses thus saw advancement and the "general equity" principle had its application.

<sup>179</sup> Jn. 5:37-39. "And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. <sup>38</sup> But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. <sup>39</sup> You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me."



Fifth, His opponents never attacked Him for His attitude toward Scripture even though they were very anxious and careful to gather proof of His heresy. In other words, they unquestioningly accepted Jesus as one with them in their high respect for the Old Testament.

Some may be tempted to reject what has just been set forth regarding Jesus' view of the Old Testament on the grounds of certain biblical passages. Jn. 1:17 and 4:24<sup>180</sup> have been so employed. It has already been pointed out above how neither of these passages accuses the Old Testament of error. Rather, they teach that the Old Testament revelation belongs to the age of anticipation, shadow and typology. It belongs to a lower level of revelation, not an erroneous level. Jn. 10:8<sup>181</sup> has also been pressed into service as support for the idea that Jesus did not have a high view of the Old Testament. In view of all Jesus says upholding the Old Testament law and prophets, it is irrational to adopt this negative understanding of this verse. Rather, it should be seen to refer either to the actions and teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees or even to the false teaching of the false Messiahs who came before Jesus.

Others reject the idea that Jesus had a high view of the Old Testament on the basis of those passages where He taught the spiritual inadequacy the Old Testament institutions, institutions that were abrogated or perfected in Him. Thus, Jesus' parable about the old garment and the new wine (Mk. 2:21-22) speaks about the Old Testament forms of religion and the newer more *alethinotic* (see above) doctrine revealed in the word and deeds of Jesus. Here He teaches the inadequacy of the older forms to contain and communicate the newer, more heavenly-complete, truths. In a somewhat different regard Mk. 7:14-19, speaking about things that defile a man, shifts the rule of religion from the outward (Old Testament) to the inward (New Testament). This "virtually abrogates the Mosaic regulations for ceremonial clean-

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<sup>180</sup> Jn. 1:17, "For the law was given through Moses, *but* grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Jn. 4:24, "God *is* Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

<sup>181</sup> Jn. 10:8, "All who *ever* came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them."

ness..."<sup>182</sup> Similarly, Lk. 22:16<sup>183</sup> talks of the fulfillment of the Passover in the Kingdom of God.

Also, Jesus does not criticize "the Old Testament mode of life as wrong for its own time, but only supercedes it as unsuitable (not *alethinotic*) for the incoming era."<sup>184</sup> He does not criticize such Old Testament matters as though they were not instituted by God. This is in contrast to His outspoken condemnation of the then-current Jewish religious additions to the Old Testament as "plants not planted by God" (Matt. 15:13). He accepted that God gave all the Old Testament laws, etc. (Matt. 5:17ff), and that they might be changed to suit the new (eschatological) age. The only question was who had the authority to change what God had given. He denied that authority to the Jewish leaders and claimed it for Himself (cf., Mk. 2:28, Lk. 6:5). In all this general teaching as to the changes introduced by His life and teaching He never loses sight of the revelational continuity between the Old and New Testaments. "The old is not ruthlessly sacrificed to the new, purely on account of the latter's newness. The idea is always that the old had the seeds of the new in itself. For this reason also a revolutionary discarding of the O.T. (sic) is out of the question." Thus, in Jn. 2:19-21, Jesus teaches that the temple to be destroyed would be restored in His own body. Although the temple was the symbol of the former revelation and Jesus was the center of the New Testament revelation, the identity of the two as the symbolical center of divinely revealed religion is taught to continue. The old persists in Jesus and what He has established.

This same teaching is found in Matt. 5:17-19. Here Jesus teaches that He did not come to destroy the Law or the Prophets but "to fulfill" them. Note first, that He refers to the Law "or" the Prophets. This is a different phrase than "the Law *and* the Prophets." The latter is used rather consistently to refer to the Old Testament as a whole and the former is not. Indeed, what Jesus says is that He came to fulfill both the Law and the Prophets. Hence second, the fulfilling and the

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<sup>182</sup> Vos, 387.

<sup>183</sup> Lk, 22:16, "for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

destroying apply to both entities. Whatever is said of one is said of the other. If “fulfill” implies that He is in any way bringing an end to one entity it must also include bringing an end to the other entity. Such an interpretation (bringing an end) stands contradicted by all that Jesus teaches about the continuity between the Old and New Testaments, and His teaching as to the necessity that all prophecies be put into practice e.g., the prophesied bringing the Gentiles into the kingdom of God (Matt. 28:18, cf. Isa. 42:1-4, Mk. 8:31, Lk. 24:44-46). Third, this interpretation makes Jesus’ saying redundant, for it understands Him to say, “I did not come to destroy, but to destroy.” Fourth, there remain two possible interpretations of “fulfill”: “rendering more complete” and “carry into practice.” The first makes Jesus contradict Himself by implying that He says He can make what the prophets said more complete. As Vos correctly remarks, “the whole idea of improving the prophets lies wholly beside the mind of Jesus.” Thus, there remains the interpretation, “to carry into practice.” This is consistent with Jesus saying, “one jot or tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled” (18) and then adding, “whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (19-20). It should be clear to all that Jesus is holding His disciples responsible to keep and teach the commandments (Law) or be called least in the kingdom of heaven. Some items in this statement may still be unclear in our discussion, but it is not unclear that Jesus intends to teach that the Law in all its details will be brought into practice. This does not necessarily mean that it will be practiced in an unchanged form. Indeed, just as Jesus transforms the Sabbath, so by implication He is saying that He might well transform other aspects of the Law. Just as He changed the form(s) of the Sabbath observance and not the principles underlying its practice, so He might well change the form of other Old Testament laws without destroying the moral principle(s) underlying them. Note that such an interpretation applies equally well to “Prophets.” When a prophecy is fulfilled it is not destroyed but it is put into practice!

All this puts the self-consciousness of Jesus in high relief. He saw Himself as co-equal with God in the matter of revelation. We see this in His attitude to the Old Testament institutions. As for the Old Testament, He held it in highest regard as the revelation from God. In contrast, He deigns to thoroughly “reform” the outward practice of religion. In so doing, He unveils His assertion of divine authority in the areas of revelation and reorganization of God’s Israel. Thus, He works out the long-promised eschatological Kingdom of God in which He as Messiah has “full jurisdiction.” He proceeds not by carefully defending His doctrine and commands from the Old Testament, as the Apostle Paul does (in order “to surmount [change] the law-structure of the Old Testament”), but He proceeds authoritatively just as God did in the Old Testament.

#### E. Jesus’ Doctrine of God

Much has been said in an attempt to prove that Jesus introduced a doctrine about God that was both different and contrary to what the Old Testament teaches. Such a position carries with the idea that Jesus introduced a new religion. While it is true that Jesus as a true Revealer did make some contributions to the doctrine concerning God, **He did not introduce a different and contrary doctrine *vis-à-vis* the Old Testament.** The newness of teaching found in Christ is a newness of extension and clarification of content. He did not reject or correct what the Old Testament sets forth.

Some who argue to the contrary see the God of the Old Testament as being quite inferior to what is set forth in the teachings of Jesus. Among such faulty ideas are those depicting the ethical nature of God as capriciously exercising absolute power in a way that displays anger, wrath, injustice, deceit, arbitrariness, etc. Also, such authors argue that the Old Testament in some places depicts God not only as acting in a human manner but as having human parts. These authors build on an assumption denying the divine origin and the internal consistency of biblical revelation. Vos points out that such authors also do not build their idea of the contradictions with regard to this doctrine between the two Testaments on a study of Jesus’ own teaching. But they compare what they see as the Old Testament doctrine(s) (re-

sulting from a higher critical approach that denies the integrity (unity of the Old Testament) with what they see as Jesus' teaching (again, resulting from a higher critical exegesis that greatly cuts up, throws away, and reorients the Gospel record). So, although they assert that they are objectively comparing the Old Testament doctrine and the teaching of Jesus, what they actually compare are two entirely different things arising more from their biased creative efforts than the reality set forth in the Bible. Proper methodology compares what Jesus taught with what is recorded in the Old Testament. Secondly, Jesus' criticisms of the then-current erroneous concepts about God are not (as sometimes argued by the higher critics) criticisms of the Old Testament. Jesus frequently criticized the Jewish religious leaders and their ideas about God. Whether and how He criticized the Old Testament ideas will be handled below.

To Jesus the Old Testament is from God and He makes no criticism of what the Old Testament teaches about God. Indeed, He teaches that the Old Testament is from God and is the very word of God. What the Old Testament teaches about God is from God and cannot, therefore, contain errors. In reply to a scribe's (lawyer) question, "Which is the first commandment of all?" (Mk. 12:28-29 and parallels), Jesus cites Deut. 6:4-5, "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." By including verse 4 Jesus implies, as does the Old Testament, that the idea of God expressed there is an adequate theological platform for the religion expressed in the Ten Commandments. This "religion" has the same platform as the preaching of Jesus does (and the rest of the New Testament). This is clear from Matt. 19:16ff. Here Jesus responds to the question, "what good thing shall I do to inherit eternal life?" The question aims directly at the principle teaching of Jesus, i.e., gaining eternal life. His answer points the inquirer to the Ten Commandments and the inquirer replies that he had kept the Commandments from his youth and adds by implication that he still lacked eternal life. Jesus pointed him to the higher principle behind the Commandments by instructing him to sell all he owned and give it to the poor. Thus, Jesus is summoning him to love the Lord God with

all his heart, soul and mind. This is the higher religion/principle that lies at the heart of both Testaments.

Jesus' acceptance of the Old Testament doctrine of God also emerges in His debate with the Sadducees' debate concerning the resurrection of the dead, Matt. 22:23ff. He concludes His powerful and winning argument (verse 31) by referring to Exod. 3:6, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." The Sadducees challenged Jesus' preaching on the resurrection (28). Jesus' reply defends His view of God who is the God of the resurrection and employs Exod. 3:6 to establish that the Old Testament God was the God of the resurrection and, therefore, that the Old Testament God was His God (or, that His God was the Old Testament God). The God of the Old Testament was, of course, the God of the resurrection, but Jesus' point is not about what *was*, His point is about what *is*. God who was the God of the resurrection still *is* the God of the resurrection. Jesus again accepts as true this view of God and reaffirms that the Old Testament and New Testament speak of the same God. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have eternal life because they *are* and were properly related to God. So, too, those who believe the teaching and the gospel set forth by Jesus have eternal life because they are properly related to God, "For He is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live to Him" (Lk. 20:38). "God is so constituted in His nature that of those religiously attached to Him eternal life and ultimate resurrection of the body can be confidently expected."<sup>185</sup>

Some have argued that Jesus accepted only part of what the Old Testament taught about God and rejected other parts (the "lower" parts). He might have done this unconsciously, but He certainly did not make such choices self-consciously. Indeed, in contrast to such thoughts stands the consistent emphasis in the Gospels that from the beginning of His public ministry Jesus acknowledged and used the Old Testament as a unit of inspired authoritative teachings all standing on the same plain as the very word of God (Jn. 10:35). This idea dominated His conscious thinking and teaching as well as, it seems

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<sup>185</sup> Vos, 390.

apparent, His subconscious. It was not just that His religious environment was flooded with this idea but His own thoughts and words were similarly inundated. "Jesus could not have retained his (sic) obvious reverence for the Scriptures, had he (sic) felt the necessity of rejecting a large part of their teaching and that on such a central topic as the nature of God."<sup>186</sup>

The central truth in what Jesus taught about God is what He said about the **fatherhood of God**. Some maintain that the idea of God's fatherhood (love) was absolutely original to Jesus. This, however, is not so. This idea is taught in the Old Testament (Exod. 4:22; Dt. 1:31, 8:5, 32:6; Hos. 11:1; Isa 1:2; 63:16; Jer. 3:19; Mal 1:6). In response it is urged that the similarity between Jesus' teaching and that of the Old Testament is purely formal (the Old Testament and Jesus use the same words but not the same ideas) and they point to three areas of difference to support their assertion.

First, it is said that the Old Testament treats the fatherhood (love) of God only in terms of His actions (i.e., as evidenced in some of the things God does; He sometimes acted with love) and not as a descriptive of His nature (not as what God was, He was not a God of love). In response, it is a true observation that the Old Testament, generally speaking, proceeds from the outward aspects to the inward and that the New Testament, generally speaking, moves in the opposite direction. **However, the Old Testament teaching is not confined to an outward depiction** of God's character as is seen in Exod. 34:6-7, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation."<sup>187</sup> Here is a clear example of a description of God's inward character. This "is as near to character-description as anything in the N.T. (sic)."<sup>188</sup> The Psalms depict God's love for individuals and on the basis of their practice of true

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<sup>186</sup> 391.

<sup>187</sup> Cf., Jer. 9:24, 2 Chron. 30:9, Neh. 9:17, Psa. 86:5, 86:15, Psa. 103:8-13. We note that in Psa. 103 the characteristics of God's nature conclude with a statement of His fatherhood.

<sup>188</sup> Vos, 392.

godliness (Psa. 11:7, 33:5). When Isa. 61:8 says God loves justice it addresses His inner character (His nature).<sup>189</sup> On the other hand, **much of Jesus' teaching on the nature of God is expressed in concrete terms**, i.e., in terms of what He did and was. **For example, in Lk. 20:36 Jesus presents the sons of the Kingdom (and the fatherhood of God) as redemptive, i.e., in terms of His actions, when He says that they will "attain to that age" of "the resurrection" and eternal life ("nor can they die any more") because they are "sons of the resurrection."** More abstract descriptions come somewhat late in the New Testament, i.e., in 1 Jn. 4:8, 16. So, the first objection to seeing continuity between the Old and New Testament concepts of God's fatherhood fails.

Secondly, it is said that in the Old Testament the idea of God's fatherhood is applied only to His relationship to Israel and only to Israel as a group; it is not applied to His relationship to individuals as it is in the New Testament. This assertion often hides an assumption that in the New Testament God's fatherhood (love) extends to all individuals by virtue of their being His creations. They are all His sons/children. But this falsely understands Jesus' teaching. To Jesus the fatherhood of God, as it is related to the sonship of men, is **a redemptive idea, not a creation (common grace) idea**. This redemptive focus of fatherhood-sonship is supported by several lines of biblical argumentation. It is seen in Christ's use of it in eschatological contexts presented in the Synoptics as the crowning of redemption. In Matt. 13:43, for example, Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God as a field that in this present age contains both wheat (sons of the Kingdom, 38) and tares (sons of the wicked one). He explains that "at the end of this age" He will send forth His angels, "and they will gather out of His Kingdom" all those tares" and that the righteous (the sons of the Kingdom) will be rewarded (43). Thus, being a son of the Kingdom is redemptive. That the fatherhood of God and the sonship of men are redemptive ideas is reflected in Jesus' regular use of the pronouns "you" and "their" in conjunction with God the Father. For example, in Matt. 6:32 Jesus again contrasts believers and unbelievers (the Gentiles) as He does throughout this segment of His "sermon", when He says, "For after all

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<sup>189</sup> Cf., Psa. 11:7, 45:7.



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these things the Gentiles seek. For *your* heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.” It is clear from the repeated use of Father and the pronouns used with it that He is referring to fatherhood as a redemptive idea. When “Father” occurs without the appended pronouns God is viewed as related to Jesus the divine Son rather than to the redeemed “sons” (cf., Matt. 11:27, 28:19).<sup>190</sup> There is a somewhat different situation in John’s Gospel where the word “Father” is used without prefaced pronouns and with reference to the disciples. However, the word and its correlative (son(s) of God) are still used redemptively. In John’s Gospel the idea is prominent that Jesus brings those who believe in Him (the disciples) into a redemptive relation to the Father, into a personal relationship similar to that which He enjoyed with God (although Jesus did not have a redemptive relationship to the Father) so that the resultant meaning of “the Father” is: “He who is my Father, and through Me now also yours.”<sup>191</sup> Contrast this with Jesus’ clear statement that the unbelieving Jews were not sons of the Father (Jn. 8:42).

Thirdly, some critics hold that the Old Testament presents a God of many characteristics (among which is His fatherhood-love) and these stand side by side even though some of them contradict the fatherhood principle. God’s wrath, hatred, “vindictive” judgment, etc., stand in bold relief to His fatherhood. In the New Testament, however, the fatherhood dominates the presentation of His nature so as to appear as its only characteristic and as that which determines the nature of all other divine characteristics. This proposition involves arguing that the limitation of God’s fatherhood among men (with its correlative man’s sonship) to Israel is in contrast to the universal sonship (and fatherhood) of God in the New Testament. This argument (and proposition) fails in view of what has just been presented in the previous paragraph demonstrating that there is no universal sonship idea in the New Testament. Moreover, its adherents also seek support in the proposition that the New Testament, building on the universalistic as-

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<sup>190</sup> Matt. 11:27, “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and *the one* to whom the Son wills to reveal *Him*.” Matt. 28:19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”

<sup>191</sup> Vos, 392

sumption, never says that God *became* the Father or that men *became* His sons. This is literally true but it is not true with reference to what the New Testament teaches by good and necessary implication. The previous discussion of Jn. 8:42, for example, presents a clear case where Jesus limits the “sons of God” to true believers and explicitly excludes the Jewish unbelievers. In doing this, He also limits the range of meaning of “fatherhood.” If the “sons of God” does not include unbelievers then neither does the fatherhood of God always include unbelievers. Moreover, the Bible does teach that men become (are not born into being) sons of God (Jn. 3:3, 5), and that God thus becomes (does not always exist as) the Father of all men “because to God paternal acts, such as the impartation of life and adoption into sonship, are predicated [upon] ... his (sic) becoming Father, to believers in a very real sense.”<sup>192</sup> Thus the New Testament teaching, as its Old Testament precedent, does not define the entirety of God’s nature in terms of His fatherhood-love, but balances fatherhood-love with other divine attributes such as righteousness, judgment (God sends the ungodly to hell), and His hardening men’s hearts so that they cannot believe (Matt. 13:13-15), etc.

Now we turn to the question **whether, according to Jesus, the love (fatherhood) of God extends to all men.** To answer this question properly one must distinguish between God’s general (common grace) love and His paternal (redemptive) love. His paternal love is extended only to the sons of God, only to the members of the Kingdom. Some might offer Exod. 4:22<sup>193</sup> to show that God’s fatherhood in the Old Testament was not limited to kingdom members, but the mention of “firstborn” does not necessarily imply that there were other sons of God outside of Israel. Indeed, to view this element in the message to Pharaoh, otherwise, makes the message nonsensical and with no bearing on the demand made to him. Rather, this phrase would communicate to Pharaoh that God loves Israel as a human father loves his firstborn even though this is His only son.

Some scholars have pointed to certain passages where they see

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<sup>192</sup> Vos, 392.

<sup>193</sup> Exod. 4:22, "Thus says the LORD: 'Israel *is* My son, My firstborn.'"

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Jesus using the fatherhood of God in such a way that the divine fatherhood is not limited to Kingdom members (as it is in the Old Testament). The texts used to establish the universal fatherhood of God in the teachings of Jesus do not establish their case. They use, for example, Matt. 5:44-45, "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." In verse 44 Jesus commands His disciples to love their enemies and to treat them accordingly. He follows this with a motivational statement arguing that the disciples should imitate their heavenly Father who extends certain blessings, common grace blessings, to all men. His argument does not rest on the idea that God is the Father of all men. Rather, He is urging the disciples (the sons of God) to imitate their Father. Moreover, there are other blessings, special grace blessings, which God gives only to those who are under the covenant, just as He does in the Old Testament. As Jesus says in Matt. 15:24, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Also, with reference to the divine fatherhood and sonship blessings (redemptive privileges) embracing only Kingdom members consider Jn. 6:44, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day" (also, Lk. 1:68ff., 54-55, Jn. 6:44, 65, 12:37-40).

Matt. 6:26 is sometimes used in arguing for the universal fatherhood—love of God, "Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" But this text, like the former text, does not support their thesis. Jesus uses God's benevolent concern for the plants and animals of the creation to assure His disciples, the sons of the Kingdom, that "your heavenly Father" will provide for you, too. It is an argument from the lesser to the greater. If God loves the lesser (the plants and animals) how much more will He love the greater (His own children, Jn. 13:33, Matt. 10:42, 18:3-6, 13-14)? God does not provide for the plants and animals because He is their Father. Neither does this verse argue that God is the Father of all mankind. Indeed, it is just because the disciples bear a special relationship to God (He is their Father) that they can look for His special

provision for them.

Additional passages have been offered to establish the thesis, but an examination of them demonstrates that: "The places in the teaching of Jesus where a divine fatherhood without reference to kingdom-membership is found, do not on closer examination bear out this idea."<sup>194</sup> Thus, in the Gospels' teaching **wherever divine sonship is found one also finds it tied to the idea of kingdom-membership. Still, one might legitimately speak of a universal fatherhood of God** and the universal sonship of all men since the Bible does talk about God's common grace. However because the Bible keeps them separate, one should keep this idea of the general benevolence (divine love and blessings upon all men) distinct from His special benevolence (redemptive blessings) upon the sons of the Kingdom alone.

In the New Testament, then, the ideas of divine fatherhood and divine sonship as being restricted to Kingdom members parallels what is found in the Old Testament but "the range [of divine sonship] is greatly enlarged in the New Testament, because the range of the people of God is also greatly extended." While the Old Testament uses this duality almost exclusively in reference to the national sphere the New Testament shifts its reference to the ethico-religious (redemptive) sphere. Also, there is a shift of usage from national to individual application. In the Old Testament the "son of God" is the nation Israel, while in New Testament every believer is a "son of God" and the object of God's redemptive fatherhood-love. The exception to this is that the Messiah is called the Son of God in Psa. 2:7. In Psa 89:26 the Messiah addresses God as "my Father." This is a solitary usage of "Father" by an individual. All the other prayers addressing the "Father" are communal prayers (e.g., Psa. 64:8). The phrase "children of God" is parallel to the phrase "son(s) of God" (Hos. 1:10, cf., 11:1, "I called my son out of Egypt"). In this (Hos. 1-3) and other passages "the children of God" is a term commonly used of Israel as a whole and "no stress should be laid on the plural"<sup>195</sup> as if individual rather than corporate

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<sup>194</sup> Vos, 393.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 394.

sonship is in view. Thus, not only is the range of divine fatherhood expanded in the New Testament but its nature is changed insofar as the individual use introduces a personal relationship between the Father and His sons (and daughters). The national use of the terms applies in a Kingship context with the connotation of the sovereignty of the King involved. The individual use of the terms leans more heavily on the fatherhood concept with the connotation of the Father's love toward His sons. However, one must be careful not to apply this distinction to rigidly for some passages appear to mix the two ideas. Indeed, the culture of the Old Testament sometimes viewed the king as benevolent (fatherhood-love) and a father as authoritative (Kingship idea, cf., Mal. 1:3). In Jesus' parable in Matt. 22:2ff the king benevolently invites even the poorest and most deplorable of his citizenry to his son's wedding feast. Thus, Jesus mixes sovereignty and benevolence-love. Moreover, since the New Testament clearly teaches that the Messiah, the Son of God, is an individual (as, for example, compared to the relative ambiguity of Isaiah's view of the Messiah) there is a correlative individualization of the fatherhood idea. This is especially seen in the Gospel of John where, as already pointed out, Jesus teaches that believers through and in Him have a personal relationship with the Father.

Jesus not only taught about the fatherhood-love (benevolent) side of God, He also spoke about the transcendental aspect of God's nature, i.e., the **divine majesty and greatness**. Such matters are addressed in treatments of the incommunicable attributes. Jesus spoke about such matters indirectly, and they are not stressed as much as the fatherhood-love and other communicable attributes. Perhaps this was because the then-current Judaism, being deistic in its concept of the relationship between God and the creation, would have emphasized such attributes.

Yet, Jesus spoke much about such things, albeit indirectly. He emphasized that one must always remember that God is indeed God. In more contemporary terms, Jesus always upheld the creator-creature distinction. So, He taught us that when praying we should address God as to His majesty by praying, "our Father who is in heaven." To this He immediately added, "hallowed be Your name," i.e., we

are to pray that God's name and person be sanctified, be recognized, held, and praised as separate from all that is involved in sin and evil. In other words, this petition focuses our thoughts on the transcendental nature of God. So, Jesus instructs us to pray of God's love and His majesty and thus teaches us by implication that, in order to avoid being one-sided, we should keep these two complementary concepts of God's love and His heavenly majesty in mind when seeking to understand His view of God's nature. Keeping the idea of divine love in the transcendental sphere gives a unique character to that love. Merely human love stemming from and directed toward men has a different quality than that *alethinotic* (see above) love flowing between God and man. Religion expressing love on any lower level does not reflect what the Bible teaches us. True Christian love, in this *alethinotic* sense, is impossible for the unbeliever since it arises out of the inward work of God in one's heart. It takes its host to a level of commitment to God and His Word that results in a unique relationship not only with God, but also with all things and persons. Moreover, only the consciousness of these two transcendental attributes of God (His divine majesty and greatness) provides the adequate base to make one realize how much God's love is truly a source of help for us. Some of those who overemphasized God's love have come to see salvation in a way that robs that concept from its biblical definition as a special state arising from God's grace, resulting in the new birth, and leading one to faith in and service to Christ. Since God loves all men in the same way, then, they conclude, all are regenerate or saved. Men need no regeneration because they are regenerate just because they are human beings. Indeed, a God who does not reveal to us these two transcendental aspects of His nature while assuring us of His love is a God that hardly rises above a merely human god. As the Psalmist says, "Those who make them are like them, "So is everyone who trusts in them" (115:8, cf., Isa. 44:9-20).

The third aspect of the divine nature in Jesus' teaching may be called "**the retributive righteousness.**"<sup>196</sup> If this very important aspect is left out of one's understanding of Jesus' teaching one cannot

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<sup>196</sup> Retributive righteousness is righteousness that pays the sinner back for his unrighteousness (sin).

truly understand what He taught. This and the divine love (fatherhood) are interrelated so that to deduct, as some seek to do, "from one to the other, in either direction, is inconceivable."<sup>197</sup> On the other hand, one can offer a reasonable argument demonstrating the divine retribution might arise from His love/benevolence. It could be that God in His fatherhood so loved the disciples (the regenerate or elect) that He would have righteously defended them when they, whether corporately or individually, were threatened. But there is also a penal side to divine retribution, i.e., God judges someone because of what they are or do (their sinfulness and sinning). This is supported by Jesus' teaching about eternal Hell into which the unrepentant are cast by the righteous judgment of God. Men end up in Hell because they are sinful (have a sinful nature) and unbelieving (Matt. 18:6, 25:46<sup>198</sup>). The point being made is even clearer in the case of Judas who is sent to Hell as judgment on His great sin (Matt. 26:24, Mk. 18:21). Rather than trying to explain divine retribution on the basis of divine benevolence, one should merely accept these two concepts as constituting a dualism although not in the philosophical sense.<sup>199</sup> Consequently, this is no contradiction or paradox. They constitute an antinomy, i.e., two principles that are not logically reconcilable by man, but are reconcilable by God. Vos correctly concludes, "The signature of the divine inner life as Jesus portrays it is not one of abstract uniformity, but one of great richness and multiformity, allowing of more than one motive force."<sup>200</sup> Therefore, Jesus' teaching on the nature of God parallels what is seen in the Old Testament. They both depict God's attributes as antinomious (existing in relationship as antinomies).

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<sup>197</sup> Vos, 396.

<sup>198</sup> Matt. 25:46, KJV translation: "And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." This translation is misleading to some. The same Greek word is rendered "everlasting" and "eternal." Perhaps the translators are trying to distinguish between the two eternal states by not exalting Hell to be a parallel with heaven, and also perhaps they are seeking to use "eternal" in a higher richer sense than "everlasting" as that state which partakes of the eternal blessedness of God Himself. We note that the ESV renders "eternal" in both instances.

<sup>199</sup> Some ancient philosophers saw reality as dualistic consisting of the eternal existence of both good and evil.

<sup>200</sup> Vos, 397.

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Divine love is given the “preponderance in bulk and emphasis” in the recorded teaching of Jesus. Why is this? In Judaism divine retribution had been emphasized to the point that divine love “had become eclipsed.” God was presented virtually as a merchant who was bargaining with man and thus salvation was virtually a commercial exchange where *quid pro quo* (this for that, a commercial-like transaction) was in effect. When compared to that approach Jesus offered a new emphasis. He made religion (i.e., salvation) a matter of divine love. Jesus taught that God gave of Himself to man; salvation is by free grace. Man can do nothing to earn it or gain it (Jn. 3:5-8). He also emphasized that men are accountable for their sin. Indeed, they are dead in their sin and cannot believe except they be taught by God, except they are supernaturally released from the bondage to sin and divinely convicted, convinced and converted. In today's world, as in Vos' world there is an improper emphasis in many (if not most) presentations of the Gospel. Now is a day to emphasize not only divine love but also divine judgment (retribution).

### F. Jesus' Teaching On The Kingdom Of God

#### 1. The Formal Questions

In the Synoptic's record, Jesus' first preaching was, “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17, Mk. 1:14). According to Matthew, John Baptist preached using the same phrase. John's use of “repent” before the phrase “kingdom of God/heaven” points to the judgment he declared was about to come upon Israel and that was to introduce the Kingdom. So, John's message was about an eschatological (*vis-à-vis* the Old Testament) Kingdom that was going to bring in an eschatological state of affairs. John (and Jesus) used this phrase as if it were familiar to their audience. The phrase does not, however, occur in the Old Testament although the idea is found there. No doubt, it originated in Jewish thought even though we do not know when this happened.

Our phrase is prominent in Synoptics but almost absent in John.



The idea of a divine kingdom, however, occurs in Jn. 18:36<sup>201</sup> signifying the Kingdom of Jesus, although the phrase is not expressly used. Jesus' usage, "My Kingdom," appears to be an equivalent to "Kingdom of God/Heaven" since Jesus came introducing this Kingdom of God (Mk. 1:14) and identified Himself as the King over that Kingdom (Jn. 18:37, Lk. 23:2). In the Gospel of John the phrase *per se* appears only in Jesus' exchange with Nicodemus (Jn. 3:3, 5). This is explained by noting that John speaks uniquely about the subjective/experiential aspect of the Gospel in such a way that in Jesus' teaching entrance into the Kingdom is entrance into a relationship with Jesus Himself. Thus, the things that constitute Kingdom participation, e.g., "life," "light," "truth," and "grace," are the things Jesus says He is. "Life" is set forth as the most prominent of these aspects and in Jn. 3, the one place that speaks of the Kingdom of God, entrance into that Kingdom is the same as entrance into "life" and that by means of "birth."<sup>202</sup> For another phrase (form) signifying "Kingdom of God" compare Mk. 11:10.<sup>203</sup> In Mk. 10:17 Kingdom entrance and inheriting eternal life are equated (cf., Mk. 10:25). In Lk. where the Kingdom of God is not set forth as the primary theme in Jesus' preaching, there is mention of "the acceptable year of the Lord" (i.e., the year of Jubilee) as equivalent to the "Kingdom of God" (Lk. 4:19, 43). In all such instances entrance into the Kingdom of God and its equivalents is entrance into that eschatological state Jesus introduced, viz., the Kingdom promised in the Old Testament (e.g., Isa. 9:7).

In the Old Testament "Kingdom of God" appears with two distinct conceptions: **God's rule and His reign.** His "rule" stands as fact and a consequence of His creating and sovereignty over all and through all time. He rules whether one acknowledges it or not. This is not a spe-

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<sup>201</sup> Jn. 18:36, "Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.'"

<sup>202</sup> Jn. 3:3, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Jn. 3:5, "Jesus answered, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.'"

<sup>203</sup> Mk. 11:10, "Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

cifically redemptive idea and does not extend over all, Ps. 103:19.<sup>204</sup> His “reign” is specifically redemptive and is usually called the “theocracy.” It extends over all those He relates Himself to in a specifically redemptive, covenantal, way. This idea finds its first explicit mention in Exod 19:6, “And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Although in the specific context God says they shall be His Kingdom if they obey His voice and keep His covenant, they are already in a covenantal relationship to Him and have already been His special people. Indeed, it is on this basis that He has kept them together as a people and blessed them since the days of Abraham (Deut. 1:8). Hence, His reign has an objective side insofar as it consists of what God does, and a subjective side, insofar as it rests on what His people do.

The Old Testament also presents a definite **already-not-yet** aspect to this divine “reign,” i.e., it teaches that once the monarchy was in place the kingdom of God was already present (e.g., Exod. 19:6), yet it was also not yet present (Psa. 45:6-7). It might be strange to think that Israel was taught to delight in the Kingdom of God they presently enjoyed and yet, at the same time, to look forward to the Kingdom as a coming and entirely new creation. Three explanations of this seeming contradiction might be considered. First, the words for kingdom often have an abstract significance. In this regard one might substitute kingship for kingdom (kingship is implied in kingdom). Kingship is a word that, in its Old Testament context, implies the accomplishment of great acts of salvation for a people (in a theological-redemptive context the Hebrew word is properly rendered “salvation”) by which that leadership is established. It is a short step to understand how it could be taught that there may be a future act(s) of the Lord by which there would be the establishing of a future Kingdom of God. God would make Himself the Savior and Ruler (“Reign-er”) of Israel in a sense not previously seen. Thus, Saul and David were kings, and their kingship (and Kingdom) was to be, potentially, an everlasting kingship (Kingdom). This promise moved from a purely earthly Kingdom lasting forever, when it was united to an eschatological hope (a

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<sup>204</sup> Psa. 103:19, “The LORD has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all.”

future hope), into an eternal and perfected Kingdom introduced by the Lord Himself. Secondly, at times in Israel's history the earthly theocratic Kingdom sank to such lows that the divine introduction of the eternal Kingdom of God seemed almost required if the promises made to David, for example, were to be realized. During the great exile, in particular, Israel's hope of return was transformed from the hope of going back to the past idealized condition of David and Solomon into an hope of a worldwide Kingdom, existing in a new age, and embracing the whole world and introduced, molded, and sustained by God Himself. Third, the teaching of the prophets, now termed Messianic prophecy, focused increasingly on the expected Messianic King who was to be the perfect representative of God in this new Kingdom. He was to be the ultimate King lacking all the limitations of a David or Solomon. In His work all the aspects of the eschatological hope were to find their perfect expression. In view of these matters, the future coming of this ideal state ceases to be out of place. Indeed, it now appears to the needed and necessary outcome of all that God had said and done since the creation.

Jesus "attaches Himself to this eschatological Old Testament manner of speech."<sup>205</sup> For example, He never refers to Israel, the Jewish theocracy, as the Kingdom of God, even though that theocracy existed in His day. Nor does Matt. 8:15 or 21:43 have to be understood as references to the then-current theocracy.<sup>206</sup> Both passages, in view of their overall context, speak not of the political entity (the theocracy) but of a spiritual entity. Jesus, indeed, initially speaks of this Old Testament eschatological Kingdom (now being introduced by Him) as a unit without stages or parts (as it is presented in the Old Testament). Eventually, however, He speaks of "two distinct phases or stages" in this one entity.<sup>207</sup> For Jesus what is the Old Testament future entity (the Kingdom of God) is not only present, "but in another sense it still remains future, even from His present point of view."<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Vos, 399.

<sup>206</sup> Matt. 8:15, "But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." 21:43, "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it."

<sup>207</sup> Vos, 400.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

Thus, as in the Old Testament while there are two kingdoms (the present and future eschatological Kingdoms) as a result of Jesus' redividing the eschatological Kingdom (what is the undivided Old Testament eschatological Kingdom) there are, to Him, two entities. To Jesus, too, the kingdom is already-not yet.

Whereas Jesus built on and extended the Old Testament concept of the Kingdom of God, the then-contemporary Judaism built on a different theological foundation. "Judaism was a religion of law."<sup>209</sup> Consequently, building on their legalist principle, they viewed the "Kingdom of God" as "a more perfect enforcement of the legalistic principle than could be attained in the present state." The coming Kingdom was an extension of their present, while to Jesus it was something very different than the legalism of Judaism. Indeed, the Kingdom promised in the Old Testament was the Kingdom Jesus declared to be present in His person and work. His acts were gracious, freely bestowed on the recipients, and with a graciousness heretofore not seen among men. To the Jews the Kingdom was limited to Jews and those who would become Jews by being circumcised and putting themselves under the Law (as it appeared in the Old Testament and was expounded in the teaching of the elders, Matt. 15:2). It was a Kingdom characterized by political nationalism. In contrast, Jesus' teaching of the Kingdom pointed it in the direction of universalism. To Him, it embraced not merely the Jews, but the entire world of mankind (Jn. 3:16). Third, the Jews envisioned the coming (eschatological) Kingdom in terms entailing sensual, earthlike, blessings. On the other hand, Jesus lifted His audience's eyes to a higher level of enjoyment and satisfaction. Thus, in His parables He spoke of the coming eschatological blessings in terms of heavenly enjoyments. These were real, not imagined, enjoyments, but were to be enjoyed, body and soul, in a higher, spiritualized (*alethinotic*) world (e.g., the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Lk. 16:20ff.).

The word used in the Gospels for "Kingdom" (Greek *basileia*) is used with either "God" or "Heaven." In the phrase Kingdom of God (or Heaven) our word may be understood in two ways: abstractly or con-

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid. The other citations in this paragraph are also from Vos.

cretely. Considered **abstractly**, "Kingdom" speaks of "the sway, the exercise of **royal rule**" and, considered **concretely** of "the concrete sense of whatsoever things go towards the making up of an **organization** called a kingdom." In its concrete connotation it entails everything that goes into making up a kingdom organization: an extent of territory, a body of subjects, or a "complex of rights, benefits and treasures..."<sup>210</sup> The question one needs to ask is: did Jesus use the phrase (Kingdom of God) abstractly or concretely? The Old Testament almost exclusively uses the idea (and phrase) of Kingdom in the abstract sense (royal rule), except in Exod. 19:6.<sup>211</sup> The Hebrew word for Kingdom in this passage (*mamlakhah*) primarily carries the concrete connotation. As a result, it is used frequently of pagan kingdoms, but of God's kingdom only in Exod. 19:6. The two other Hebrew words rendered Kingdom (*malkuth* and *melukhah*) primarily bear an abstract connotation and are thus frequently used of God's Kingdom.

This brings us back to question: which connotation did Jesus employ? We have already seen how Jesus built His teaching on the Old Testament. This suggests that He used the abstract idea of "kingship" as just explained. But an examination of His teaching itself results in relatively few places where this idea of kingship was employed. It is seen clearly in two passages. First, in Matt. 12: 25, 26<sup>212</sup> Jesus speaks of Satan's kingdom in terms of his authority or rule, although His use of "city or house" might suggest the more concrete idea of kingdom. Second, in Matt. 16:28<sup>213</sup> is best understood in terms of the abstract connotation. There are a number of passages where it is difficult to decide which connotation is being set forth, and, hence, might be seen to represent instances of the abstract idea. This **abstract** idea seems to more suitable in a number of passages where Kingdom is addressed in terms of its "coming," "appearing," "being

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<sup>210</sup> Vos, 400.

<sup>211</sup> Exod. 19:6, "And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These *are* the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel."

<sup>212</sup> Matt. 12:25-26, "But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: 'Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?'"

<sup>213</sup> Matt. 16:28, "Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."

near," etc., although even here the concrete meaning is not always clearly obviated. At the same time, there are several passages where the **concrete** connotation is required in order to visualize properly what Jesus is saying, i.e., passages associated with the phrases "to call into," "to receive," "to inherit," "to be cast out from" the Kingdom of God, etc. One will notice that this represents a shift in Jesus' teaching from the predominant Old Testament usage of the abstract connotation of the word "kingdom." This shift is understandable in view of the general emphasis in Jesus teaching on grace rather than law (the dominant theme in Jewish teaching). As we study Jesus' teachings our minds are filled with the realities of redemption that "join themselves together to form the structure of a concrete organization or *milieu* of life, the Kingdom of God becomes incarnate." Ultimately, this concretization of the Kingdom-idea becomes, in His preaching, that of the institution of the Church.

The Gospels use and report the use not only of **"the Kingdom of God"**<sup>214</sup> but also of **"the Kingdom of Heaven."**<sup>215</sup> Matthew also uses the phrase, "Father in Heaven" a phrase that is not used elsewhere in the Gospels other than in Mk. 10:25. Luke employs a similar term when he uses "Father from Heaven" (11:2). In only one instance does Matthew provide an explanation for using "Kingdom of God" and that is in 12:28<sup>216</sup> where it seems clear that because He casts out demons by the Spirit of God that He calls the Kingdom thus introduced "the Kingdom of God." It would be strange were He to describe the resulting Kingdom in any other way. God's Spirit introduces God's Kingdom. In most cases in Matt. "it is impossible to discern the reason for the divergence" from the usage of Kingdom of Heaven. Another Matthean uniqueness is the use of the phrase "the Kingdom" without any additional descriptive elements. "In the rest of the New Testament we read only of "the Kingdom of God" (cf., Rom., 1 Cor., 2 Cor., Gal., 1 and 2 Thessa., 2 Tim.).

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<sup>214</sup> Cf., 6:33, 12:28, 19:24, 21:31, 43.

<sup>215</sup> Vos, 402, points out that outside of Matthew "Kingdom of Heaven" does not occur except for a textually questionable variant reading in Jn. 3:3, 5.

<sup>216</sup> Matt. 12:28, "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you."

Why did Jesus use the phrase “Kingdom of heaven?” Some have suggested that with this phrase Jesus is seeking to avoid offending Jewish sensitivities since they avoided even speaking the word “God” lest they profane the Lord’s name. Instead, they used the word “Heaven” and other substitutes. So, “heaven,” when thus used, simply meant “God.” This phenomenon appears in other places in the New Testament. According to Luke’s report of Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, when the prodigal returned he confessed to his father, “I have sinned against heaven and before you” (Lk. 15:18, 25). Note that “heaven” is used in parallelism with “you” (the natural father). Thus used, it is clear that “heaven” refers to God Himself. Matt. 21:25 records the question Jesus asked the delegation from the Sanhedrin, “the baptism of John – where was it from? From heaven or from men?” Again, the immediate context makes certain that “heaven” is a substitute for “God.” The fact that Jesus Himself substituted “heaven” for “God” to adjust His language so as not to offend Jewish culture on this matter, does not argue that He agreed with their reasons for avoiding the use of the word “God.” He did not agree with their religious superstition. They had moved from a biblical view of God and His relation to His creation to a deistic-type of concept. They had exalted God in a non-Biblical way. Hence, theirs was not Biblical use of terms but a non-Biblical use and they believed that in this way they were pleasing God. Hence, it was superstition and not revelation that undergirded their thought. Along the same line of thinking they held that God had to be kept separated from the creation lest He be degraded. Hence, they sought to avoid degrading God by even pronouncing the word here in this creation. On the other hand, they also thus sought to highly exalt and honor God. Jesus shared this same high religious motive but did not pursue it so as to eliminate a proper use of the names of God (including the word “God” itself). Indeed, much of His teaching was designed to correct this deistic element in Jewish thought by emphasizing God’s close communion and fellowship with man.

Also, “heaven” was not simply a substitute for “God” even to the Jews. For the Jews saying “God has done a thing” is different than saying “heaven has done a thing.” The latter phrase emphasizes uniquely that the thing was done supernaturally. **Whereas, “God” does all things both natural and supernatural, “heaven” does on-**

**ly the supernatural.** This may also be the implication in the phrase, “the Father in heaven.”<sup>217</sup> Viewing the phrase “Kingdom of Heaven” with this understanding argues that here there is more than a mere substitution of one word for another. Rather, the idea of the Kingdom is enriched in the mind of His audience. It now carries the implication of its strictly supernatural character, its majesty, and perfection. Thus, while clearly signifying that the Kingdom is God’s, this phrase enriches that Kingdom in a special direction.

Another issue relating to Jesus’ teaching about the Kingdom of God focuses on **its nature**. Some would argue that there is a certain parallel to the preaching of John the Baptist and that of Jesus on this matter. John preached that he was a forerunner of the Kingdom and not the one who introduced it into the world. So, they would conceive the teaching of Jesus, viz., that He was the Kingdom fore-runner and not the Kingdom “bringer.” They would argue that Jesus did not introduce the Kingdom of God into the world. They would deny that the Old Testament view that the Kingdom to come (the eschatological Kingdom) was a single unit but that in Jesus’ preaching that single unit was divided into two units, the present realized state (the realization of some aspects of what the Old Testament had prophesied) and a future not-yet-realized state (the realization of other aspects of the Old Testament prophecies). However, **Jesus declared the presence of the Kingdom in His person and work.** He did not correct Nicodemus’ or the rich young ruler’s thought of gaining entry into the Kingdom now. Indeed, He preached that the Kingdom was present now. Moreover, He spoke of the Kingdom realization on earth as **a gradual process.** It was like the growth of a mustard seed, of leaven. It was introduced and would grow until it leavens the whole loaf (Lk. 13:21). Thus, the labor of His disciples during His lifetime and after the resurrection until He comes again is Kingdom-producing labor (Matt. 28:18-20). This expansion of the Kingdom **continues** until Jesus returns at the termination of this world-order (Lk. 22:18, Heb. 12:28, Jas. 2:5), “at which point through a catastrophe of world-transforming character the eschatological Kingdom-state will be introduced.”<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Vos, 404.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.



Some have denied that Jesus spoke of “the present-gradual ... realization of the Kingdom,” that Jesus introduced a “preliminary, gradual Kingdom.”<sup>219</sup> Vos terms them “ultra-eschatologists.” They view Jesus’ ministry as a purely preliminary work. He did not come to set up the Kingdom, but to prepare for its coming. However, such a view denies His Messianic consciousness, repudiates His declarations that He was promised Messiah, that all that He was and did was the work of God in and through Him, and that He was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. To Jesus His coming and work was all occurring at the divinely appointed moment in history (the fullness of time, Mk. 1:15). Rather, these critics see the coming of the Kingdom exclusively in terms of what was future to the earthly ministry of Jesus. It is to appear at the end of this present age and would constitute the beginning of an eternal order of things.

This ultra-eschatological view has some serious implications. It contradicts the infallibility of Jesus since it holds that the course of things He envisioned did not come to pass. It focuses His teaching not on the present-spiritual matters but on external and eschatological matters with the former being no more than the preparation for the latter. Indeed, only the latter, the external eschatological matters, is “the Kingdom.” This tends to lessen the importance of morality, of moral living, in this present world. It does this by focusing the minds of believers on the immediacy of Jesus’ return and the greatness of the Kingdom He will bring, rather than having a balanced emphasis on that coming and on the significance of whole-minded living for Jesus in this present age (Matt. 7:21ff.). It makes Jesus and His teaching look as if He was so otherworldly minded that He was virtually of no use in this world.

Such an ultra-eschatological view has, therefore, many shortcomings, but it should be given credit for reviving interest in Jesus’ teaching on the matter of **a truly future-to-Him eschatological state**. This emphasis has served as a corrective to the theology that teaches that the program for the church was to get progressively godlier and to

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

bring in virtually all others on the earth so as to bring in the Kingdom of God here on this earth. In contrast to this overly optimistic eschatology, we need to remind ourselves of Jesus' teaching that this present world order will be abruptly interrupted by His return. Such a future-to-Him eschatology is "inherent" in the Christian position. "It was prepared under the auspices of this, born under them, and must in the end stand or fall with the acceptance or denial of them. This is a generic eschatology." The necessity of such a basic scheme of things is established when one considers both postmillennialism and premillennialism. A postmillennialism that leads to a perfect world is impossible to conceive. First, if that postmillennialism builds on the verses that seem to say that all men will be part of that perfect world then how will it be possible to see the multitudes who have died in former times perfected? Also, the conversion of all mankind would not make them perfect unless one embraces the doctrine of perfectionism. Indeed, if one accepts the necessity of the new birth as taught by Jesus, then one would have to include a world-wide work of God in changing all then alive, and this is hardly presented explicitly in the Bible. Indeed, to the contrary, Jesus taught that "wide *is* the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow *is* the gate and difficult *is* the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it," Matt. 7:13-14. Moreover, the present world-order is such that it is permeated with many factors that make a continuance of a state of perfection impossible. Hence, optimistic postmillennialism requires a transformation of the creation to sustain itself. In reaction, some have turned to a postmillennialism that conceives the order of things to be the coming of Jesus to introduce a Kingdom of God on earth such that it realizes, it is held, the perfections of Old and New Testament prophecies. Some maintain that if a believer rejects this scheme he has no true eschatology at all. But such a claim (from some premillennialists) disturbs "all the normal proportions in this matter." It obscures the proper feeling for the generic scheme (outlined above), "which by far has the more ancient credentials, and into which every premillennarian scheme will have to be fitted in order to deserve the name of being Christian." So although overly optimistic postmillennialism rejects true Biblical eschatology by way of leaving no room for it, some premillennialists focus so much on eschatology that they leave no room for the Kingdom Jesus estab-

lished here on this earth.

If we follow the teachings of Jesus we **must reject the overly optimistic postmillennial position**. On the other hand, He did teach that **the spiritual Kingdom He had brought would gradually grow** to a certain point (known only to God) at which point God would intervene and introduce the final stage. This scheme is encased in the parable of the growing seed (Mk. 4:26-29). The farmer, having scattered the seed, goes about his life while the seed sprouts and grows by means he does not know. However, when the grain ripens he harvests it. Thus, teaches Jesus, the Kingdom of God grows until it "ripens" and then the reaping comes at a time men do not know, but God knows. It is implied in this that the reaper of the Kingdom is Jesus Himself as is established by Jesus' parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:40-41, cf., 13:47-50). Thus, **this "gradually growing" spiritual concept of the Kingdom introduced by Jesus and the "abrupt eschatology" is inherent** in the very structure of these parables, and, therefore, in the teaching of Jesus.

It has been maintained here that **the teaching of Jesus is two-sided**. On the one hand there is the idea of a present, inwardly-spiritual developing Kingdom. On the other hand, there is the idea of a catastrophic conclusion of the present order and the introduction of the eschatological Kingdom. These two ideas should be denied by no one. Some, however, while not denying that both ideas were taught by Him, maintain that there was further development in the not-yet soon-to-arrive purely eschatological (future) Kingdom that Jesus preached at the first. When that arrival tarried, and since the words of Jesus could not be denied, there arose a "compromise" position. The result was that the full eschatological Kingdom was seen to be here in the form of the church, i.e., the Church-Kingdom. According to its adherents this view (this growth in Jesus' teaching) does not denigrate Jesus or His ministry, it merely provides an explanation of what the Gospels present. Also, this compromise was not introduced by Jesus Himself, but originated in the early Church who introduced it into the Gospels. However, this explanation does not, contrary to what it claims, faithfully represent what the Gospels record.

## REVELATION OF JESUS' PUBLIC MINISTRY

The Gospels provide much evidence that Jesus taught about a future eschatological (not-yet) Kingdom (at the same time He was also teaching about the already-here Kingdom), e.g., "And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11).<sup>220</sup> However, the presentation of this evidence will be limited because almost no one doubts that Jesus taught this aspect of the Kingdom. Jesus especially uses this consummation sense of the Kingdom when speaking of His own future state of glory, e.g., "'Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.' But Jesus answered and said, 'You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?'" They said to Him, "We are able" (Matt. 20:21-22).<sup>221</sup> Synonymous terms are used in the same way, i.e., speaking of a not-yet consummative eschatological state, e.g., "the coming age" (Matt. 12:12:31,<sup>222</sup> 19:28, Mk. 10:30, Lk. 9:34). Note that in several sayings Jesus did not use such phrases but simply affirmed that the Kingdom was yet to come. These eschatological passages (and others like them, e.g., Matt. 7:21) tend to demonstrate that **He spoke at first of this Kingdom as the final Kingdom and of its coming as a real coming.**

As said above, **Jesus also spoke about the already-here aspect** of the Kingdom. The biblical evidence shows that: (a.) He spoke about the Kingdom of God as already present in His day, and (b.) He described it as consisting of internal spiritual realities. We now turn to a summary of that biblical evidence. First, consider Matt. 12:28, "'But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you,'" Lk. 11:20. So, Jesus affirms that driving out the "demons by the Spirit" evidences that the Kingdom has come. This "teaches a present Kingdom realized through the expulsion of the demons, but casts no further light on the character of the Kingdom-state thus called into being." This teaches that when the demons are driven

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<sup>220</sup> See also: Matt. 13:43; Mk. 14:25; Lk. 13:28, 29; 22:16.

<sup>221</sup> See also: Matt. 19:12, Lk. 23:42.

<sup>222</sup> See Matt. 12:31, "Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.

out the Kingdom of God is present, “that in the world of spirits there is no neutral territory.”<sup>223</sup> The text clearly requires the translation “has come” and rejects the rendering “has come nigh” (or close) insofar as Jesus said clearly that the Kingdom has come “upon you” and not that it has come “near you.” Some have argued that the Greek word rendered “come” should be translated “has come by surprise.” Vos remarks, “while such is the connotation of the verb *phthanein*” in the older Greek, it need not be in the later period.”<sup>224</sup>

The second passage in our chain of evidence is Lk. 17:21, “For indeed, the Kingdom of God is within you.” Some have challenged the translation “within you” pointing out that the Greek word *entos* can mean either “within” or “among,” although the former meaning is usually chosen. Such a translation (within) speaks both of the present existence of the Kingdom and of its spiritual nature. Retractors respond that Jesus would not have told the Pharisees that the Kingdom of God is within them! Moreover, they point out that given this translation Jesus does not answer the Pharisees’ question regarding when the Kingdom would come (17:20). In reply it may be pointed out “within you” does not necessarily show that Jesus is saying the Kingdom is within the Pharisees. The pronoun “you” may be taken as a reference to those within whom the Kingdom exists and not as a reference to the Pharisees (it may be an enclitic, i.e., its meaning is dependent on the meaning of “Kingdom of God”). In response to the second objection, it is well known that Jesus “not seldom shifts a question from one sphere to another; here He might have properly done so in order to intimate that not the “when” but the “where” is the all-important issue.”<sup>225</sup> Also, the translation “within you” has the following matters in its support: Lk. always uses Gk. *en mesoi* (εν μεσσοι) for “in the midst of”. Moreover, if “within” is chosen in this passage, it means that this is the only place Luke uses *entos* (εντος) in this way. Luke’s usage agrees with the Septuagint usage. Finally, all of the passages cited to support the translation of *entos* as “in the midst of” come from “older Greek, not from the Hellenistic period.” Vos concludes, “we are, therefore, war-

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<sup>223</sup> Vos, 408.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

ranted in giving the preposition “*entos*” here a peculiar coloring of inwardness.<sup>226</sup>

Third, we turn to Matt. 11:12 and its parallel passage Lk. 16:16.<sup>227</sup> In these passages Jesus teaches that from the days of John the Baptist the Kingdom of God (Heaven) has been present, already here in history. The Luke passage reports that the Kingdom has been preached. The present tense (the Greek word rendered “has been preached” is in the present tense) is used signifying an ongoing action that started in the speaker’s past and is continuing in his present. So, a more accurate rendering might be, “has been and is being preached.” This is further supported by the phrase “the Law and the prophets *were* until John” that speaks of a definite cutting off point of the older revelation in contrast to the introduction of the new revelation starting with John’s preaching. This does not contradict what has previously been said about John as the last of the Old Testament revelatory period and as a forerunner. Rather, it acknowledges that he was, indeed, a harbinger of the newer revelation, a gospel (Gk. *euaggelizetai*/ εὐαγγελίζεται), which “has been preached” since his time. He did, after all, preach that Jesus was the true Messiah.

A fourth support for the proposition that Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God He preached was an already present Kingdom is Matt. 11:11 and its parallel Lk. 7:18.<sup>228</sup> Here Jesus teaches that John the Baptist was not in the Kingdom of God Jesus preached, but in doing this He says, “he who is least in the kingdom is greater than he (i.e., John).” The Greek construction is interesting because it supplies the Greek verb meaning “is” with the “greater” when this is not neces-

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<sup>226</sup> Vos. 409.

<sup>227</sup> Matt. 11:12, “And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.” Lk. 16:16, “The law and the prophets *were* until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it.”

<sup>228</sup> Matt. 11:11, “Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” Lk. 7:28, “For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

sary (we note that there is no verb supplied with “the least”). Hence, it carries an emphasis so as to underline the contemporaneity of Kingdom membership. So, the Kingdom was then present but John, because of his office as the forerunner, was kept out of it.

Another line of evidence is found in the Kingdom parables (Matt. 13, Mk. 4, Lk. 8) in which both the then-present reality and the spiritual nature of the Kingdom are plainly taught. The ultra-eschatologists deny this element was from Jesus and argue that this was a later element introduced by the Church revisers in the interest of inserting (legitimatising) their Church-Kingdom doctrine into the Gospels. The assumptions of such ultra-eschatologists render further changes to the parables, but all their efforts fail because what they seek to remove (the ideas of the already-present Kingdom) are throughout the parables. To remove such elements completely one has to deny the authenticity of the parables themselves. Furthermore, they seek to change the introductory formula attached to these parables even though it is attested in other contexts (Mk. 4:11, Lk. 13:18). Interestingly, the protesters accept this formula as original in these other contexts and accept it without change. Such attempts having proven unacceptable, others raise another argument to prove the absence of an already-present Kingdom in Jesus' teaching. They argue that the places where some see Jesus talking about an already present Kingdom should be understood as His talking about signs forewarning its coming or indicating its first and meager beginnings. In other places they change the entire thrust of the parable so that it teaches both the minuscule foretelling that something truly great was approaching, and also the greatness of that Kingdom which is coming. Thus, their interpretation affirms the principle of the gradual but present existence of the Kingdom while seeking to deny this very thing. Moreover, some of the parables, those based on comparisons from the plant kingdom, “appear ill-adapted to describe the explosive character of the terminal events.”<sup>229</sup>

The idea of the already-present Kingdom also appears in Matt 6:33, “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” Here the thought is that the King-

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<sup>229</sup> Vos, 410.

dom of God is to be sought and entered, and after entering it all these things (food and clothing) will be added. In other words, do not be as the unbelievers who seek these things first, but first seek and obtain God's Kingdom and you will get these things in addition. Similarly in Lk. 4:18-21 Jesus declares that He is gospel-preaching that the "acceptable year of the Lord," the ultimate Jubilee year, is not only promised but "is fulfilled in your hearing." It is now present and the signs of its presence are being displayed publicly. In Matt. 9:15<sup>230</sup> (cf., Mk. 2:19) Jesus teaches that His disciples do not fast because the joy of the Kingdom's presence renders fasting, a practice when mourning, inappropriate. The Kingdom is here; fasting is wrong-headed. Finally, in Matt. 13:16-17<sup>231</sup> (cf. Lk. 10:23-24) Jesus tells the disciples they are blessed because they are privileged to see and hear what the Old Testament prophets and kings longed to see and hear but did not. Surely, the hope of those former righteous men was to see the long-promised Kingdom of God come. Again, therefore, Jesus teaches that the promised Kingdom of God has already arrived.

Vos **summarizes the differences** between the two aspects of the Kingdom as follows:

"(a) The present Kingdom comes gradually, the final Kingdom catastrophically; (b) the present Kingdom comes largely in the internal, invisible sphere, the final Kingdom in the form of a world-wide visible manifestation; (c) the present Kingdom up to the eschatological point remains subject to imperfections; the final Kingdom will be without all imperfections, and this applies as well to what had remained imperfect in the spiritual processes of which the present Kingdom consisted, as to the new elements which the final Kingdom adds."<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Matt. 9:15, "And Jesus said to them, 'Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.'"

<sup>231</sup> Matt. 13:16-17, "But blessed *are* your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous *men* desired to see what you see, and did not see *it*, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear *it*."

<sup>232</sup> Vos, 409.



It should be stressed that every phase or aspect of the Kingdom is represented by Jesus as truly religious and supernatural. It comes from God, is developed and nurtured by God, and is governed by the spiritual, ecclesiastical and moral laws revealed by God.

## 2. The Essence of the Kingdom

The first issue in seeking to define the essence of the Kingdom of God preached by Jesus is to seek **an explanation of the phrase He uses**. In other words, why did Jesus call the new order of things “the Kingdom of God”? As we shall see, there are other phrases He might have used to express Himself. The phrase itself did not come from the Old Testament because it does not appear there. Nor does it come from Judaism since the phrase was not used there, as Jesus uses it, with an eschatological connotation. When they referred to a coming Kingdom they used words that, to them, focus on the nation itself (the nation Israel), e.g., “the coming world,” and “the coming age.” So, Jesus used a different phrase that was defined in terms of His thinking rather than in terms of how Judaism thought. His thought centered on God not on Israel. It was truly theocentric thinking. The Jewish thought was deistically inclined (Judaism) connoting God’s oversight from heaven by which He allows man (the Jews) a kind of moral independence from His sovereign control. The Kingdom they envisioned was not thoroughly caused by, controlled by, and focused on God alone. Even today there are those who are inclined to a kind of deistic picture of the Kingdom of God. To them the emphasis is on “the Kingdom” and not on God’s absolute sway in all things in the Kingdom. Like the Jews of old, they speak of God but virtually render Him inactive in the Kingdom processes. To Jesus, the Kingdom of God is the “realization of His sway.”<sup>233</sup> Although it is an ideal (a future eschatological entity), it is not merely an ideal; it is a present reality. It is already here and not yet here. Both aspects are present in Jesus’ use of the phrase. He wisely did not use the phrase “sovereignty of God” in seeking to communicate His idea, for this phrase does not necessarily involve the idea that God is actually and presently involved in working out His Kingdom on earth. Sovereignty carries a more ab-

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<sup>233</sup> Vos, 412.

stract and legal connotation. Jesus' phrase carries a more concrete and actualizing connotation.

In seeking to communicate Jesus' emphasis one might render His phrase as "of God the kingdom." Written in this order the emphasis is on God and His actually exercising "the divine supremacy in the interest of the divine glory." This emphasis may be seen in passages such as Matt. 6:10, 33; Mk. 12:34; also cf. 1 Cor. 15:28. This divine supremacy, the core concept in the Kingdom of God, branches out in several directions, i.e., **it is worked out in three spheres of divine influence: power, righteousness and blessed-ness.**

The first sphere is **kingdom as power**. The power element is already prominent in the Old Testament. This idea continues in the Gospels in the prayer Jesus instructs us to pray, the Lord's Prayer. This prayer closes with a threefold confession of God's rule and worthiness. It is rightly noted that this doxology is absent in Lk. 11 and does not appear in some of the best manuscripts of Matt. 6. Yet, it still indicates the mind of the early church. Also, according to Matt. 12:28 Jesus responded to the charge that He used the power of Satan to cast out demons that He used the power, the Kingdom power, of God to accomplish this task (cf., Lk. 11:20). The miracles are "credentials of Jesus, beneficent actions of His grace," and evidences of Kingdom power. They are uniquely Kingdom miracles, "signs of the arrival or nearness of the kingdom." They are both, "symbolical of spiritual transactions and [usually] prophetic of things to come" (eschatological).<sup>234</sup> The power to accomplish the miracles (the Kingdom making power) is directly associated with the Spirit who qualifies Jesus for His messianic ministry.

Paul was the vehicle through whom this part of Christian doctrine is most fully set forth, i.e., the empowering of and by the Holy Spirit as a working out of the Kingdom of God. Still, the Gospels present the Spirit as the "Author of revelation and miracles." In John the Spirit is presented as the successor of Jesus. Moreover, Jesus' ministry is a bridge between the Old Testament and New Testament ministry of the Holy Spirit. "In the Old Testament the Spirit is the Spirit of the theo-

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<sup>234</sup> Vos, 413. All quotes on this page are from this same source.

cratic charismata, who qualifies prophets, priests and kings for their office, but is not communicable from one to the other.” Unlike the Old Testament saints who received an anointing of the Spirit, Jesus received the fullness of the Spirit and dispenses it to His followers, “first partially and by means of promise, then in greater fullness by way of fulfillment at Pentecost.” Indeed, He dispenses not only the Holy Spirit but also His own spirit (Himself), so that “to be in the Spirit is to be in Christ.” Hence, the entire Christian life is said to be communion with Christ such that it is a life “lived in and inspired by the Spirit in all its strata and activities.” Moreover, this Spirit-filled living has an eschatological reference. In the eschaton the Spirit is to dominate and characterize all of living. Thus, the present living in and by the Spirit is the first fruits, earnest, and seal of that eschatological living.

**Kingdom as faith is a correlate, at least in part, of the Kingdom as power.** It is “in part” since faith relates strongly to divine grace “no less than to divine power.” In the Synoptics faith appears mostly in the context of miracles. **In such contexts miracles are the objective object and faith the subjective aspect of Jesus’ works.** Why are miracles in particular associated with faith? The first reason is the Jesus’ miracles are “beneficent, saving acts.” Thus, they both exhibit divine grace and elicit in the recipients a mental state of trust. But, more significantly, miracles are assertions of divine sovereignty. As such, men (the recipients) have no part in the accomplishment of a miracle. From beginning to end a true miracle is uniquely the work of God. As rule, therefore, they are accomplished by Jesus’ mere word (Matt. 8:8, 16). This is clearly illustrated by the healing of a person with a demonic spirit (Mk. 9:18-24, cf., Matt. 17:15). The father had brought his son to the disciples and they were unable to help (Mk. 9:18). Subsequently, he presented the boy to Jesus saying, “but if you can do anything” (22). To this Jesus replied, “if you can believe, all things are possible...” The Father’s “if you can” does not acknowledge Jesus’ deity. Obviously, implies Jesus, “I can” for “all things are possible to God” (cf., Matt. 19:26, Lk. 1:37). Consequently, He asked, by implication, the man about His state of belief. The help was not a matter of God’s ability; the power to do miracles is in God’s hands. But, in this instance, the exercise of that divine power appears to depend on

the father's faith.<sup>235</sup>

Vos rightly comments, "in this dependence on the omnipotence and grace of God lies the religious rationale of faith. Faith is the practical (not purely reasoning) recognition on the part of man that the saving work in the Kingdom is exclusively a divine work."<sup>236</sup> Faith is not a magical element, nor does this human element contribute to the result as if God could do no miracle apart from man's permission or help. If this latter circumstance were true then faith would carry within itself an inner contradiction since it would need to acknowledge (1) that God alone was able and must work and that there was no condition outside Himself for that working, and, on the other hand, (2) that there is an urging for man to fulfill at least a preliminary condition. This matter is eased by recognizing that there are two kinds of unbelief presented in the Bible. First, there is an unbelief that is so deeply rooted that even if a miracle were divinely effected the recipient would conclude that the one who did the miracle was the Devil (or the equivalent, Matt. 12:24). Second, there is an unbelief that is not so deeply rooted and that would be led to true belief were it to receive sufficient evidence from God (Matt. 19:26). God can use whatever means He chooses to lead one to true belief, but whatever instrument He may use the cause of the conversion is solely divine. Above all, "faith is the work of God" (Lk. 22:31, 32, Mk. 9:24, Jn. 6:28-29)

Not only is **faith the work of God, but also, biblically speaking, it is not dependent merely on an arbitrary choice of man willing or refusing to exercise it.** Faith rests on a motivation. It is not an irrational mystical urge resting on mere whim. Rather it "pre-supposes knowledge, because it needs a mental complex, person or thing, to be occupied about." Thus, much of modern preaching about Jesus, but without preaching a creed, is theologically, scripturally, and

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<sup>235</sup> This is not to say that the man's faith elicited God's work. Rather, this situation parallels the role of faith and divine sovereignty in regeneration. Faith does not cause God's regenerating work, nor does it even permit it, yet where God works man must have faith. Truly Jesus said to the two blind men, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to Him, "Yes, Lord" (Matt. 9:28), and He healed them. This matter is in the area of the antinomy, i.e., what appears contradictory to man's reason and is resolved in God's mind.

<sup>236</sup> Vos, 414.

psychologically in error. Moreover, knowledge is more than a prerequisite of true faith; it is an ingredient of it. Knowledge, constituting a nuclear creed and doctrine, is involved in the presenting the name of Jesus. Those who reject the idea they attribute to “creed,” misconceive the force of this word. It does not necessarily signify a minutely worked out theological structure of belief. However, they need to be reminded that belief necessarily precedes faith. Biblically speaking, to believe one must believe in something and that something involves knowledge (Matt. 8:10, Lk. 7:9). It was knowledge that Jesus saw in the centurion, knowledge of unworthiness to host Jesus, knowledge of being bound by his position to do what others told him to do. It was this knowledge that led him to ask Jesus not to come to his house. He would not have a holy one in his unholy house and presence. In the face of this knowledge Jesus marveled and said, “I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel.” Also, knowledge is not in itself faith. It must develop to trust before it may be identified as faith. According to Jesus, unbelief (the lack of faith), however, is not tied to how much one knows as if more knowledge, or right knowledge, was an automatic precursor to true faith. He said that the root of unbelief was “being offended” (Greek *skandalizesthai*/σκανδαλιζεται), cf., Matt. 11:6. This Greek word signifies a wood chip holding bait in a trap that springing up shuts the trap and causes the animal to be caught. In Jesus’ use an offense is temptation to unbelief. In His teaching He is the offense insofar as He is “diametrically opposed to what to the Jews expected their Messiah to be and to do.”<sup>237</sup> Their preconceptions and preferences were not innocent but sinful and indicated the corrupt state of their hearts. So, the offense resulted from and was due to their sinful nature just as it is in the case of all mankind (cf., Rom. 1:20-24).

**How faith works in man is illuminated by how the word(s) for faith are used in the Bible.** The Greek verb is “*pisteuein*” (πιστευειν), and the adjective is “*pistos*” (πιστος). The adjective occurs in the Gospels only as the negative “*apistos*” (απιστος). The positive form is passive in significance, i.e., “believed in,” and “reliable.” The word “*oligopistos*” (ολιγοπιστος) literally signifying “short of faith” in the sense

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<sup>237</sup> Vos, 416.

that such a faith does not reach “far enough to attain the end.” When our word is used with the Greek preposition “*ev*” (in =  $\epsilon\nu$ ) it is difficult to tell exactly what is intended. This is, no doubt, due to the fact that in modern language, as well as in the various levels of older Greek, the construction “to believe in” is unusual. Perhaps the construction is a Hebraism. The preposition “*eis*” (into =  $\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ ) is normally followed by the accusative of that in which belief is placed. It may refer to a mental idea, i.e., “towards” the object of faith. Or, it may refer to a local idea such as “to exercise faith into Christ.” This local idea is more Johannine and Pauline than the prior Synoptic usage. The preposition “*epi*” ( $\epsilon\pi\iota$ ) is used both with a dative and an accusative object. The first signifies believing “on the ground of” something (sometimes Greek *en* ( $\epsilon\nu$ ) may bear the same significance). Used in this manner the faith is seen as rising out of the evidence. The second construction is similar to what *eis* connotes. It differs from its relative in that *epi* with the accusative signifies believing upward toward the object of faith.

The Gospel of John sets forth several unique ideas regarding faith.

1. Here **faith is regularly related to Jesus “coordinately with God.”** This “coordination arises from the fact that Jesus is consistently pictured as “the duplicate of God.” In the Synoptics, however, only in Matt. 18:6<sup>238</sup> (Mk. 9:42) is Jesus explicitly presented as the personal object of faith. This is not to say that according to the Synoptics Jesus did not view and present Himself as the object of faith. We say this because the Synoptics also mention God as the object of faith only once (Mk. 11:22) and it is inconceivable to think Jesus did not regularly teach that one was to believe in God. It is hardly defensible to conclude that Jesus was not speaking about believing in Himself in Lk. 8:12-13<sup>239</sup> and parallels. Also, it is quite evident that those healed by Jesus believed, “developed an attitude of trust,” in Him. According to

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<sup>238</sup> Matt. 18:6, “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in (*eis*) Me to sin...” The support for the text of Mk. 9:42 leaves that reference somewhat uncertain.

<sup>239</sup> Lk. 8:12-13, “Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock *are those* who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away.”

the Gospel of John, Jesus told the disciples with reference to the Father and in anticipation of their reaction to the crucifixion, "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me" (Jn. 14:1). Although this verse is not from the Synoptics, it is still in the Bible and documents that Jesus taught belief was to be in (*eis*) both Himself and the Father.

2. In John, "**faith is more a continuous, habitual relation between Jesus and the believer**; in the Synoptics it appears mostly as a momentary act in those upon whom the miracles are wrought." even here, however, attention is called by Jesus to the fact that what faith has done once it will do again..." On the other hand, according to Lk. 8:43ff. (cf. its parallels) Jesus healed the woman "having a flow of blood for twelve years." The healing occurred when she touched the border of His garment from behind. After she declared what she had done, Jesus said to her, "Daughter, be of good cheer; your faith has made you well. Go in peace." It is altogether reasonable to conclude that Jesus intends to teach all who heard (and all who read) that the faith He preached was a faith that would accomplish more than physical healing; believing in Him would bring a believer to eternal life.<sup>240</sup> In Lk. 8:25 after rebuking the storm, Jesus rebuked the disciples saying in response to their fear, "Where is your faith?' Surely, He is teaching them that saving faith is a faith by which one should live. Moreover, clearly this is faith in Himself as the Savior and Provider. With these verses (and others) it is evident in the Synoptics that faith in Jesus is presented as that which is an indispensable element in true religious life.

3. **Faith "lays hold of the glorified Jesus"** (Jn. 14:1ff.)..." both now and in the future. Jesus said that He was the bread of life, and "Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If any-

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<sup>240</sup>Cf., W. Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1978), 459, "was he not also stressing the fact that it was his *personal response* to her *personal faith* in him that cured her, thereby removing from her mind any remnant, however small, of superstition, as if his clothes had contributed in any way to the cure?"

one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of world" (Jn. 6:49-51). With these words Jesus teaches that He is the life-giving bread for now and for all eternity. And He explicitly ties all of this to believing (faith) in Him (cf. 6:47).

4. According to John, **faith and knowledge are tied together**. They have an "intimate ,faith of Greek philosophy in general, nor of Greek Gnosticism in particular, nor of its Christian daughter (also called Gnosticism). This is "a practical knowledge of acquaintance and intimacy," e.g., of knowing the shepherd's voice. Indeed, Jesus taught that the one who knows Him (the Son) knows the Father. It is the kind of knowledge spoken about in the Old Testament, 'know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD" (Jer. 31:34, cf., 1 Sam. 2:2, 1 Chron. 28:9). Faith is not only closely tied to knowledge, it is also closely tied to "seeing" (intently and in the sense of "believing on", Greek *theoreo*, θεωρεω), cf., Jn. 4:19, 6:40, 12:45, 14:17. Also, everyone who "sees" Jesus (in this special sense of seeing tied to believing) "sees" the Father (Jn. 12:45). Significantly, the relation between Jesus the Father is never described with the construction Jesus' disciples "believe on,"<sup>241</sup> "know," and "see (gaze on)" Christ. Also, one may "gaze on" and "know" the Holy Spirit but not "believe on."

5. John also **most clearly describes the relationship between unbelief and its source**. Unbelief is the expression of a nature typified by hatred for Jesus, God and all righteousness (3:20, 7:7, 15:18, 19, 23). It is termed "the sin" (Jn 1:29, 8:34, 15:22) and, as such, unbelief is conceived as the expression of the deepest significance of sin, as a rejection of and turning against God.

6. **Four sources of belief** are indicated in John. These may be conceived as layers of thought moving ever closer to the ultimate or foundational source itself. The highest layer or idea pictures faith as

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<sup>241</sup> Vos says this knowing that Acts 16:31 says," So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." Apparently, his statement is limited in its reference to the Gospels.



“the result of a course of conduct; those believe who do the truth and walk in the truth, etc.”<sup>242</sup> The next layer offers faith as “the result of right spiritual perception,” a perception God works in its possessor. Here faith is depicted as that which is learned or heard from the Father. The third layer has faith as “the outcome of a state of being” as “being in the truth.”<sup>243</sup> Finally, the ultimate source of faith is God’s sovereign election. Under this heading we are taught that faith is the necessary result in those whom the Father has given to the Son, or has drawn efficaciously to the Son.

**These sources of faith are at root all one, the sovereignty of God.** This construction is continued from the Old Testament. There, too, there is a foundational acceptance of the truth that determines the subsequent attitude towards God. In the New Testament the object of the subsequent attitude is Jesus.

The second line along which Jesus works out the supremacy, the sovereignty, of God in the Kingdom is in **the realm of righteousness**. In seeking to define “rightness” one needs to look for a definition that is common to both Testaments. To be certain, Jesus is a New Testament figure. However, as already shown previously, He accepted and built on the teaching of the Old Testament.

There are some **presuppositions in this search** for Jesus’ idea of “righteousness” that **need to be exposed and set aside**. One very strongly presupposed idea is the assumption of present day legal parlance. Here there is a distinction between what is legal and what is righteous. “Legal” is defined in terms of the law as it exists in a contemporary society (the U.S.A. for example). This may be quite different than what is righteous or right. Righteousness or right is decided in a rather imprecise and vague way and may vary from person to person or group to group. Legally speaking right is what is “equitable.” This is defined in terms of what men have decided mutually (a

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<sup>242</sup> Vos, 418.

<sup>243</sup> Jn. 8:44, “You are of *your* father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and *does not* stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him.”

social contract). There is no room here for God and His Word in the Bible. Many determine what is right according to a somewhat Platonic concept of knowledge whereby every man has in his own mind the eternal supra-“creational” standards of the “right” or “righteousness.” Some advance a little further into a kind of Aristotelianism whereby truth lies in the hands of a group of experts, of their courts, their religion, philosophers, etc., for their definition of “righteousness.” Whatever forms the foundation for a man’s concept of “righteousness” we who are believers must evaluate all by God and His definition(s) as it is set forth in the Bible. Anything less than this is paganism. It is not only paganism. It is also confusion. Without an absolute standard only subjectivism exists. Apart from an objective standard one man’s opinion, or one group’s opinion is just as good as the others. Not only is there subjectivism but there is nihilism; nihilism in the sense that there is no real right or righteousness. All that there is, is no more than mere opinion. It might be that due to common grace man’s opinion, or opinions, might by divine grace set forth a true righteousness or, at least, some aspects of true righteousness such as the rules that govern contemporary American society. On the other hand, all this truth is extremely subjective and floats on a sea of accident. In other words, such truth (such righteousness) can, and has been, changed when the determining body changes its collective mind. In support of this assertion we offer the winding road of the U. S. Supreme Court and, even more, of the various ruling bodies all of whom are dealing ultimately with what is right, i.e., with righteousness.

Biblically speaking, **righteousness is God centered and God defined.** Hence, it is and must be “that which agrees with and pleases God, and exists for His sake, and can only be adjudicated by Him. He is first of all and above all the interested Person.” Hence, (a) the source of righteousness (and its only proper definer) is God. (b) True righteousness “exists for God as its end.” It “agrees with and pleases God, and exists for His sake.” Moreover, (c) “it is subject to God as the ultimate Justifier.”<sup>244</sup> If God sets something forth as righteous it is righteous because He has set it forth. Even if a man cannot perceive why this is righteous, he must accept it as such. God has spoken. Not

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<sup>244</sup> Vos, 419.

to submit to God as God is to rebel against Him and turn to some other assumed ultimate source (God). So, biblically speaking true righteousness is God centered, i.e., God referenced righteousness. Ethically, this righteousness contexts all true religious life. It defines true piety.

This idea of righteousness “**stands [in] closest connection to the Scriptural idea of the Kingdom of God.**” In the ancient world, the world of the Bible, “the king is *ipso facto* the Law-giver and the Executioner of the Law” (Psa. 72; Isa. 33:22). Moreover, the king is the center of national and political life. Everything and all persons in the kingdom exist for his sake and for his pleasure. This is a strange concept to the modern western mind where individualism is a dominant, if not *the* dominant, idea underlying society. This idea of the divine right of kings is the foundation of all true religion, i.e., of a proper biblical religion. It is the idea God has used in revealing to us the meaning of the ‘Kingdom of God in the sphere of righteousness.’<sup>245</sup>

These ideas as to **the divine right of the king** are found in the teaching of Jesus, and especially in the way He relates the Kingdom and righteousness. Here, we see that His concept of theocentric righteousness is, indeed, His concept of the theocentric Kingdom. This is shown, **first**, in the way He parallels the two concepts so that **they are seen as concurrently developing entities** (Kingdom and righteousness) or as developing along side of each other. Practicing righteousness is presented as the “practical recognition and furthering of God’s kingship.” Thus, Jesus taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come, Your will [righteousness] be done on earth as *it is* in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). Here the coming of the Kingdom is seen as practicing of God’s righteousness.

Jesus’ teaching the concurrence of righteousness and God’s Kingdom is seen, **second, when He presents righteousness as the result of the Kingdom**, as “one of the many gifts, which the new reign of God freely bestows upon its members...” The reception of this new kind of heart righteousness is introduced in the Old Testament. In Je-

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid, 420.

Jesus' teaching it is the unfolding, the eschatological realizing, of the Kingdom. With the coming of the promised Kingdom there is the gifting of this heart righteousness. Jeremiah foresees this new kind of righteousness when God says through him, "I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts" (Jer. 31:33). Jeremiah presents this as a contrast to the Old Testament external righteousness, "No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me" (Jer. 31:34). This kind of righteousness also underlies a more external legalistic type of righteousness, and the Mosaic Law puts the spotlight on the legalistic righteousness even while resting it on the heart righteousness (Gal. 3:16-17). The New Testament, however, spotlights heart righteousness. It appears in Jesus' statement in the Sermon on the Mount in which He speaks of those who hunger and thirst after righteousness (Matt. 5:6). His statement, "for they shall be filled" parallels Jeremiah's new covenant in which righteousness (the Law) is a gift of God and not a result of man's efforts. Similarly, God, through Ezekiel, says He will put His Spirit "within you and cause you to walk in My statutes." Again, this is an eschatological righteousness that results from and is an expression of the Kingdom. It is the righteousness for which the blessed hunger and thirst. They have a receptive attitude toward it. It is the righteousness with which they shall be filled upon the coming of the Kingdom (cf., Matt. 5:3).

Jesus' teaching on righteousness is, in a sense, like that of Paul. Both teach that righteousness is the "one great central gift in the life of the Christian, that on which everything else is based."<sup>246</sup> The idea that heart righteousness, the gift of God, and not mere external righteousness is the foundation of true religion is taught in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee (with his bold confession of mere external righteousness) and the tax collector (Lk. 18:10ff.). Only the tax collector who evidences true heart repentance and righteousness was justified. Later, Paul extends and refines the teaching of Jesus by distinguishing between objective righteousness as a gift received through imputation (what we receive) and subjective righteousness (referring to what we do) which becomes ours through the inworking of the Holy Spirit. At

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<sup>246</sup> Vos, 420.

bottom “both are one as the gift of God.” Paul and Jesus differ in their terminology. Paul speaks of justification; Jesus speaks of entrance into the Kingdom or becoming a son of God. Paul pictures righteousness as an objective status; Jesus views it largely as a subjective condition.

In the **third** line of Jesus' thinking on the relationship between the Kingdom of God and righteousness “**the sequence between the two is reversed.**” Jesus sometimes presents the idea that righteousness precedes the Kingdom. The Kingdom comes as a reward for righteousness. This is said of the eschatological Kingdom; the Kingdom that will come after this life is over. It is an idea that runs through much of what Jesus taught. However, this is not a commercial idea (*quid pro quo*) as in Judaism. A proper grasp of what Jesus taught in this respect requires one to divest himself of the modern idea that “every thought of reward in ethical relations” is “unworthy of the sacredness of ethics.”<sup>247</sup> Jesus does not teach that rewards in the eschaton are based on the merit of the recipient. Rather, they are based on the merit of Jesus. Also, one should note that Jesus Himself is “the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2). His was not sinful selfish claiming a reward. Rather, it was selfless obedience to God motivated by the divine promise of eternal reward. Hence, working for a divinely promised reward does not necessarily involve sin. In Jesus' teaching, moreover, the promised reward is ethically of a higher nature than the commanded obedience. What is promised in the beatitudes, for example, is a godliness that is righteous to seek. The pure in heart will be rewarded with seeing God. It is not sinful to possess (as a personal state) the Kingdom of God properly. It is not sinful to be poor in spirit. The commandment is something believers ought to do by virtue of their new birth. Thus, Jesus said of His disciples, “Does he [the master] thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do'" (Lk. 17:9-10). The

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<sup>247</sup> Vos, 421.

servant does not deserve a reward when he has done what it is his job to do. So, we disciples when we have served God as well as we can have only done what we are supposed to do and, hence, we do not deserve a reward, as though we had earned it. We have only done our duty. Even so, God promises He will give rewards to us. This does not mean that God owes us the rewards He says He will give. The reward is not of necessity. This same point is taught in Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1ff.). God's rewards are gifts not payments earned by men.

Now we will briefly look at **Christ's critique of Jewish ethics**. That system of ethics has **two fundamental defects: "its tendency toward Deism and its infection with self-centeredness."** It evidences the following serious faults:

(a) **Externalism**: "the law was not obeyed with the idea of the supervision of God in mind, the service of the Law had taken the place of the service of the living God."<sup>248</sup> It pictures reality in three levels: God in heaven, man on earth, and a layer of laws between God and man. God issues the law(s), man is responsible to keep the law(s), and man is not controlled (supervised) by God. Rather, man has moral freedom to control Himself (the service of the law). In the realm of law and obedience God leaves man to His own free will. So, although man is to serve God, this is understood as an indirect service resting on man's self-determination.

(b) "The breaking up of the law from a well-organized state [Old Testament law] to **a state of utter un-organism** [rabbinic law]..." The "un-organism" was the result of Jewish casuistry, i.e., the process of deducing law from the biblical corpus and extending and adjusting it to fit current situations and needs. The result left the law *per se* behind. As Jesus taught, it majored on minors and missed the majors. Jesus said to the Jewish legalists, "you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin [the minors], and have neglected the weightier matters of the law [the majors]: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" (Matt. 23:23-24)

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<sup>248</sup> Vos, 422.

(c) Ultimately the result was an **all-pervasive negativism**. In their interest not to violate, to break, the law they “drew a fence” around it. They developed a complex system of laws around the biblical laws in order to guarantee their obedience. Thus, the main thing was not to keep the Law, but to guard against violating it. Indeed, this was a system of avoidance.

(d) Thus, arose a **self-righteous externalism**. One could keep the whole multitude of rabbinic law, and even the Ten Commandments, and miss the all-important biblical emphasis on heart religion and personal relationship with the living God. Much attention then was given to the outward keeping of the law, and, generally speaking, no attention was given to spiritual godliness. This is exactly Jesus' emphasis when He instructed the rich young ruler (cf. Matt. 19:16ff. and parallels). Surely, Christ's message here is that the young ruler, in spite of his external honesty, was a self-righteous externalist. When Christ pointed to his sinful nature rather than to his sinful deeds, he left sorrowful. He was not willing to love the Lord God with all his heart, soul and mind. He loved his possessions more.

(e) Growing out of this externalism is a **confidence in man's performance, his righteousness**. Of course, this arises and is maintained in spite of one's own conscience. The rich young ruler, for example, was drawn to Jesus by a sense of his own inadequacy. He had a sense of not possessing eternal life. He had a sense of a “discord between the heart and the outward life.” It drove him to Jesus but it did not drive him to true repentance. He was a hypocrite even though he may not have been consciously aware of this fact. He was a “subjective” hypocrite. On the other hand, some who are in this state are very aware of the internal guilt telling them that they have no true righteousness. However, they deny what they know. They are “objective” hypocrites (cf. Rom. 1:21-23, 32).

Christ's teaching on **repentance** is another aspect of His teaching on the Kingdom of God. To the Christ-faith, as discussed above, repentance is a correlative of the power-aspect of the Kingdom. Moreover, repentance corresponds to the righteousness-aspect of Christ's Kingdom teaching. Thus, He came preaching repent and believe. In this message there is always an “assumption of sin as the background

of the free offer of the gospel.”<sup>249</sup> Such repentance is not meritorious as if earns Kingdom citizenship. Repentance is a non-meritorious circumstance of the gospel. Man must do it, but salvation is a free gift of God.<sup>250</sup> Consider also, the man cast out of the wedding feast because he was not clothed in the righteousness of Christ (Matt. 22:11-13), not because he was not clothed in his own righteousness. In this parable subjective repentance, i.e. admission to the feast, is depicted as a condition of every guest. On the other hand, regeneration, the garment supplied by the host, is an objective, imputed righteousness.

**The various Greek words** translated repentance spell out the meaning of biblical repentance (i.e., as they are used in the New Testament). These terms are: (a) “*metamelesthai*” (μεταμελεσθαι). This term literally speaks of an “after-sorrow.” “The emotional element of regret for a past act or course of action.” Although carrying an emotional element it does not necessarily speak of a superficial repentance like that of Judas (the bad sense of this word), although it might be used in this way. In its best sense, it speaks of a sorrow “after God” leading to righteous living and not to a subsequent turning back to sin (2 Cor.7:9-10, KJV). (b) We also read of “*metanoian*” (μετανοιαν appears both in the noun and verbal forms) signifying “a change or rather reversal of conscious life, will and affections included...” This term does not signify some response after an act (as the previous word does). Also, it is “always used of saving repentance.” As Paul suggests in 2 Cor. 7:10, this is a repentance that will not be subsequently reversed. (c) The third Greek word “*epistrephesthai*” (επιστρεφεισθαι) connotes turning one’s self about. It does not speak of an “internal state of mind reflecting upon its past” (like the first word), nor is it an “inner change of mind turned into its opposite” (like the second word), but it speaks of the “turning of the will towards a new, opposite goal,” a conversion.<sup>251</sup>

The unique nature of Biblical repentance, in contrast to the repentance envisioned in paganism, is that it **envisions a compre-**

<sup>249</sup> This and the other citations on this page are from, Vos, 423.

<sup>250</sup> This antimony is set before us in Jn. 6:35-40, 44-47.

<sup>251</sup> Citations from Vos, 424.



**hensiveness of the turn of mind.** As just seen, "it is after-sorrow, or reversal of consciousness, or redirection of the life upon an opposite goal," with regard to the entirety of one's inner and outer life. In the pagan mind repentance is seen atomistically, i.e., it relates to a specific thing or things the subject has done. Although the Christian concept contains this idea it goes beyond it. Sin is not simply atomistic (it does not relate simply to a single sin or sin(s)), it is **holistic**. It relates to one's entire nature and character. Hence, the pagan never truly repents. Moreover, the biblical call to repentance is addressed to all men. No one is exempt. Men are at their root sinful and no one is exempt (Jn. 3:3-7, Lk. 13:1-5). Also, in Lk. 11:13 Jesus speaks of men generically and conceived as not as righteous and merciful as God, calls them all evil, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will *your* heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" Then, too, Jesus taught, "repentance ... should be preached ... to all nations" (Lk. 24:47). Some have objected to this view of the call to repentance applied to all men on the grounds of Mk. 2:17, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance." However, in this verse "righteous" describes what men think of themselves, and not Jesus' view of them. The meaning, therefore, is "I did not come to call the *self*-righteous..."

The experience of biblical repentance is **God-centered**. Its point of departure is always depicted in its relation to God. It is a strictly religious idea, not a world-ethical idea. The state of non-repentance is expressed in the word "being lost," i.e., not having a normal relation to God when viewed from an eternal perspective. Jesus illustrates this idea of being lost in the parables of lost sheep, lost coins, and of the prodigal son. The prodigal "sins" by leaving his father's house. In this parable repentance before God is the central focus. The offense is against Him, and the repentance with its accompanying sorrow is focused on Him as its object. "The new direction of life which the repentance brings about finds its explanation in the absolute and exclusive subjection of the whole life with all its desires and purposes to God." It is in this context of the extreme depravity of sin, deepest sorrow, absolute forsaking of everything and returning whole-heartedly to God, that seemingly extreme statements appear in the Gospels. In

Matt. 10:35ff. Jesus teaches that He has come to bring division in families. He calls believers to love Him more than their own families, indeed, more than they love their own lives, leaving all to turn single-mindedly to God. In the Sermon on the Mount He told us all that if our hands, feet, etc., cause us to sin we should cut them off. Thus, Jesus teaches that "it is only when these natural things become occasions for failing in the whole-souled devotion to God, that their absolute renunciation is demanded." Hence "an abstract rule of universal self-surrender of such things cannot be laid down."<sup>252</sup> The separation is an inner spiritual separation of the soul to God alone. In some cases, though, this absolute renunciation from all other things is needed in order to bring about the inner spiritual focus on God above all other things, i.e., in order to love the Lord God with all one's heart, soul, and mind.

The third line along which Jesus develops the supremacy of God is in the sphere of **blessedness**. This relationship between Kingdom and blessedness is partly of a "generally eschatological character and partly of a specific kingdom-eschatological character."<sup>253</sup> Generally speaking, the final order of things (including of the Kingdom of God), biblically considered, brings with it a supreme fullness of blessedness. Specifically viewing matters in terms of kingship, one should note that the ancient view of kingship carried with it the idea that it existed to bring blessedness upon all its subjects. This same perspective appears in Jesus' teaching. Specifically, Jesus preached that God the father gave the Kingdom, in all of its eschatological implications, to the disciples as a gift. Thus, He ties together the fatherhood of God and the Kingdom of God. In Lk. 12:32 He said, "Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Also, Jesus said, "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. 13:45-46). So, the Kingdom of God is like a precious pearl. In this parable, He explains that the merchant sold everything he owned and purchased the pearl. So, be-

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<sup>252</sup> Vos, 425.

<sup>253</sup> Vos, 425.

lievers should see the Kingdom as the pearl of great price and act accordingly.

The Kingdom blessedness set forth in Jesus' teaching is both negative and positive. **This blessedness entails three principle ideas: salvation, sonship, and life.** Salvation is depicted as both negative and positive. Life and sonship are both presented as positive only.

The **organization of the Kingdom into the form of the Church**, the final idea involved in properly understanding the Kingdom, is the only area in which we can see genuine growth in Jesus' teaching. The two places where this development (an addition and an advancement) is evidenced appears in the Caesarea-Philippi account, cf., Matt. 16:18-20. Here Jesus gives the Kingdom "an outward organism" and endows it "with a new dynamic of the Spirit."<sup>254</sup> Some have denigrated the church in favor of the Kingdom, i.e., they wrongly separate the church and the Kingdom. To this end, the cry of antisectarianism has been raised, i.e., they argue that Jesus did not thrust upon us an allegiance to a particular religion or religious sect. Rather, He taught we are all of the same Kingdom. Some postmillennialists have wrongly separated the church and Kingdom by asserting that the Kingdom relates only to the earthly millennial period. Others wrongly identify the Kingdom and the church. For example, Roman Catholicism maintains an identity between the church and the Kingdom. So, every sphere of life falls under the jurisdiction of the church, the Roman Catholic Church and the Church is viewed as a Kingdom. Others distinguish between the so-called visible and invisible church saying that the invisible church only is the Kingdom.

A proper understanding of Matt. 16:18-20 provides important instruction that helps clarify all this confusion. Here, **Jesus does not speak of two separate institutions.** Rather, **He closely unites the church and the Kingdom of God** in these verses. He starts by affirming that He *will* build His church, thus painting a verbal picture of building a structure (v. 18). In vs. 19 He extends this picture to embrace a completed structure, and it is the keys to that structure that He

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<sup>254</sup> Vos, 426.

promises to give to Peter (also, to the disciples, and their successors who “rule” the church). So, it is clear that the church and the Kingdom are in principle one. Since the distinctions such as those mentioned above all fail to use this teaching that the church and Kingdom are in a real sense one, they all fail to be faithful to Jesus' teaching. **The church is included in the Kingdom.** All attempts to avoid the reproach on the church by fleeing to a supposedly separate Kingdom are falsely conceived. Nor is it acceptable to hold that only part of the church, viz., the invisible church, belongs in the Kingdom. The exercise of the keys of the Kingdom applies to the visible church “for only with regard to that [the church] can ‘keys’ of administration and the functions of binding and loosing be spoken of.”<sup>255</sup> This may be confirmed by a study of the book of Acts and the epistles of Paul where it is clear that the apostles and ministers of the New Testament viewed themselves as operating in Christ's Kingdom-church in preaching and church discipline.

With the words “My church” Jesus **recalls the extensive Old Testament use of the word**, and teaching about the church. There, in the Greek Old Testament, the Greek word now rendered “church” frequently appears as a regular rendition of the Hebrew word usually rendered (in English) “congregation.” In the Old Testament the church is the church of Yahweh. Now says Jesus this institution has a new identity as “His” church. Indeed, in Christ that Old Testament “church” finds its abrogation. It is replaced by His church, the Messiah's church. It is the church for which the Messiah, in accordance with Old Testament prophecy, gave Himself (Eph. 5:25). In saying, “I will build” and “I will give” Jesus speaks of the futurity of the realization of His church.

His words recorded in Matt. 16 also introduce a “**new dynamic**,” i.e., that the building Christ is to introduce will withstand all that the evil power might send forth through the gates of the mighty citadel of Satan who exercises that power from which no man escapes, i.e., the power of death (Heb. 2:14). The greatest citadel (building), however, will be the church, the Kingdom of God, from which will stream forth a

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 427.

power that will successfully overcome the power of death itself. Thus, it is implied that through Christ's resurrection He will fill His church with such unconquerable life, infusing it into her by the Spirit, that death will be wholly conquered by the church (Rev. 1:18)."<sup>256</sup>

There are various sayings of Jesus that are sometimes cited to demonstrate the way **He closely connected the Church and the Kingdom**. In the closing period of His life He spoke several times about the soon coming of Himself and His Kingdom, e.g., "For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom." (Matt. 16:27-28) The language here certainly might be understood in terms of the near and powerful coming of the ultimate eschatological Kingdom. Understood in this way, these passages teach that Jesus did not anticipate an extended period of time between the resurrection and His bodily return at the end of the church age. But this understanding fails because it says Jesus was not omniscient. He was fallible insofar as He taught something that has proven to be wrong. On the other hand, in several statements recorded in the Gospel of John Jesus appears to be speaking of a soon spiritual return, not to be identified with His ultimate eschatological return at the end of this age, e.g., "You have heard Me say to you, 'I am going away and coming *back* to you.' If you loved Me, you would rejoice because I said, 'I am going to the Father,' for My Father is greater than I." (Jn. 14:18) Vos calls such language "semi-eschatological."<sup>257</sup> Such statements, no doubt, speak of the coming of the Kingdom-church.

Finally, what Jesus says in Matt. 16:18-19 might be understood as teaching that the church is no more than an instrument to accomplish certain ends such as preaching the gospel or, even more, of spreading the gospel throughout the world. However, **the church is much more than a means to an end (s)**. The church constitutes the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12). When Christians are gathered together

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<sup>256</sup> Vos, 428.

<sup>257</sup> Vos, 428.

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as the body of Christ, they have fellowship not only with one another, but they fellowship with Christ (2 Cor. 6:14-16). The assembled church is the temple of God (Eph. 2:21).

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