The Gospels and Christ: a Global Perspective

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"If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you (Luke 11:20)."

There is a perfectly huge amount of literature on the subect of the Kingdom of God. You can find endless discussions about when such a Kingdom is going to come and if it is already here. The NT talks about it in both ways.

You can even read about the supposed or possible difference between the *Kingdom of God*, which is a phrase most frequent in Mark and Luke, and the *Kingdom of Heaven*, which occurs in parallel passages in Matthew. John has very few occurrences of the *Kingdom of God*.

This particular statement, "If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you," is not found in Mark or John, but in Mattew and Luke. In Matthew it is one of the only four instances where Kingdom of *God* not Kingdom of *Heaven* occurs. The phrase Kingdom of Heaven occurs 32 times in Matthew and no other place in the entire Bible.

Many scholars believe that Matthew and Luke build on Mark to begin with, which is the shortest of the Gospels but that Matthew and Luke were able to employ an additional document, called "Q," which is merely the first letter of the German word for "source."

Thus, possibly some of the four references in Matthew to the Kingdom of *God* rather than Kingdom of Heaven may have come in from the Q document.

The best explanation for Matthew's use of the Kingdom of Heaven in place of the Kingdom of God, as I see it, is the fact that Matthew was beamed to Jews and they did not believe in pronouncing the word *God* but tended to use the word *heaven* instead. Jesus Himself may have done that in the Lord's Prayer, where the word *god* does not occur but rather it says, "on earth as it is in *heaven*" - that is, as it is in the domain of God's rule..

In any event, if someone on the mission field who has never heard of the Bible were to read the Gospels for the first time they would clearly get the idea that the Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of Heaven), is the main subject - not in the sense of "how to get to heaven" but how the power, the rule, the authority of God - of Heaven - can get to earth, how His Will can come on earth as it is in heaven.

By contrast, the religious mutation of Christianity that emerged from the Reformation focuses on the opposite, turning the NT upside down, allowing us to misread dozens of passages.

Apparently in the long, slow history of Western civilization, before the Bible was really widespread, Christianity did not present a challenge for change in this life so much as it helped people otherwise lacking in any conceivable earthly hope to submit to the "as is" situation and fix their hopes on the afterlife.

The Bible much more focuses on God's will, His Kingdom, becoming a reality in this life. I am still enough of a fundamentalist not to think that the world is going to get better and better until Jesus comes to congratulate us on our accomplishments, but I do think He expects us to work toward that end whether it is attainable or not as a means of glorifying His Name, and empowering our evangelism. What rings in my ears is the phrase in the parable, "Occupy 'till I come."

If Jesus had just gone around and urged people to wait out the next world, the Gospels would have been very different from what they are. Jesus challenged every kind of evil. Your readings this time make reference to the series of very unusual concerns He had, which contrasted sharply and unexpectedly with the perspectives of the devout and religious disciples.

Indeed, to this day we extensively misunderstand the NT. We don't often hear people interpreting the Parable of the Prodigal Son as primarily presenting the older son as the Jewish people who did everything right but could not understand the Father's love for the other nations, who, in their perspective, were unredeemable.

You see the same modern confusion about the parable granting equal wages to workers who were not there all day. This procedure would logically have astonished the earlier workers, who, in this case, typify the Jews who are consternated over God's goodwill to the gentiles as seen in the behavior of Jesus.

This missiological issue became a very drastic situation as recounted in Luke 4, when Jesus deliberately pointed out two OT instances where God was good to non-Jews. In that case the synagogue crowd exploded in fury and surged forward to kill him.

In other words, standing back, removing our religious glasses that seem to see everything in terms how we can have our sins forgiven and get to heaven, we can begin to glimpse an almost entirely new scene in which the issue is not so much *salvation* as mainly *service*, that is, what we do after we get forgiven. In fact, Jesus actually said, "he who seeks to save his life will lose it and he who will lose his life for me will save it. Very slight variations of this statement occur in all three synoptic gospels, actually twice in Matthew and Luke - verses rarely quoted by Evangelicals.

This repeated emphasis of Jesus has a very different meaning from a common approach in evangelism where you begin by asking a person if they were to die right now would they go to heaven, thus focusing attention in the very beginning on how they might seek to be saved.

Jesus "message" is summed up in the Gospels as two words: "repent and believe," which probably meant something like, "give up your own pursuits and follow and obey Jesus Christ." Yet we interpret it to mean, "ask forgiveness and assent to a short list of theological statements and you've got it made.

Look at John 17:1:

After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and

prayed: "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you."

Or, John 17:2:

For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

Or John 4:33:

Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?" "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."

This verse makes clear that God has work on earth to do. Connect that statement with the following:

John 17:4:

I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.

In these verses you can see clearly the New Testament balance - the New Testament indissoluble connection - between the recruiting of human beings and new life in Christ and the work of the Father.

For Jesus to glorify the Father it was necessary for the Father to glorify Him. In some sense it's the same with us. But for God to glorify Himself in us is not an end but a means to the end that we might glorify Him.

However, we normally take all this to mean that God's main purpose is to rescue men and to glorify them, when the fact is that He is equally recruiting men to serve Him as Jesus did in glorifying His Name. Jesus recruited people into the Kingdom of God which was an important achievement, but He also was recruiting them to do as He did - as He said, "As my Father has sent Me even so send I you." He didn't say, "As my Father saved Me so save I you." That's the Evangelical interpretation which essentially ignores the entire larger cause of redemption. Seeker churches and Evangelicals in general are usually seeking people who seek to be saved rather than people who are willing to repent and believe and be God's servants in following Jesus and serving as He served - both saving men and seeing them glorify God.

One of the very key verses in this respect is I John 3:8,

The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil.

In the New Testament "the works of the devil" to which Jesus could refer were drastically limited by His hearers' limited understanding of creation and of the fallen condition of creation. For example, they knew no more about germs than John Calvin did. The challenge for us today is to discover what Jesus would have said to them had they known what we know about germs, in other words, would He have said that germs are one of the works of the devil which He and His followers are to set out to destroy?

It is common today among many Evangelicals to be content with the first century understanding of nature and to believe that if we can just build up our immune systems enough through eating the right things, in other words whole foods, organic foods, instead of degraded foods, that we will then be able to throw off any disease whatsoever. It is admitedly amazing to the extent that this is true. But there are still an large array of diseases from smallpox to SARS to Guinea worm to river blindness to tuberculosis to dengue fever which we

have to go out and slay. The healthiest immune system will not guard you against malaria.

Challenge 1

In other words, a major challenge faces anyone who lives in the age where we can actually see tiny parasites like malaria in microscopes and we can trace the four very clever stages of their attack on the human body. We have even noticed their insidious change in their human hosts to make the bodies of those infected attract more mosquitoes so their infected blood can be transmitted to still more victims.

I point this out simply to illustrate the extensive difficulties in understanding for our day what Jesus wants to say to us if we merely focus on what He said in the first century. With increased insight into the works of the devil we have an increased span of responsibility. Our Christian mission becomes different and larger.

Challenge 2

The second major challenge to which we need to refer in this lesson is the very perplexing question of how the New Testament is different from the Old Testament. In the early centuries, Jews did not want to be persecuted along with the Christians and understandably sought to make clear to the government that the Christians were not Jews. Thus, lamentably, many Christians were tortured and executed because Jews made that point to the government. The Jews had certain rights of religious expression, on which the Christians, they felt, ought not to depend.

Meanwhile, there was an enormous cultural difference between the increasing numbers of followers of Christ who were Greeks, and the proportionately decreasing numbers of Jewish followers of Christ. The distance became isolation. The isolation bred prejudice, antagonism, and criticism which grew across the centuries.

For these reasons exaggerated contrasts were often drawn between the Old and New Testaments giving the general impression of the inferiority of the earlier testament. Walter Kaiser, Jr., an eminent Old Testament scholar, does not even think the phrase "Old Testament" is a helpful label. But his perspective is not the understanding of the mainstream of our Christian cultural tradition.

As a result, when we study the contrasts and continuities between the O.T. and the N.T. we find ourselves walking on eggshells. Very few people are as willing to recognize the continuities as the contrasts. But the continuities are obviously the most basic doctrines of the entire Bible.

Just last Sunday I heard a sermon that stressed the fact of grace in the New Testament versus the fact of law in the Old Testament, when in fact Abraham was as much saved by grace as anyone in the New Testament. There's no significant distinction between the grace of God and the power of the blood of Christ to forgive, whether you lived before or after His

birth. It's also true that faith is not something that was invented in the New Testament or that came to light only in the ministry of Christ or the apostles.

When Paul, in Romans 1:5, stated his commission under God to be "to bring about the obedience of faith in all nations" he wasn't saying something that was brand new to the New Testament. When in the next chapter he insists that the meaning of circumcision is to "circumcision of the heart" he's not saying anything different from what we read in Jeremiah, or even back in Deuteronomy.

It is patently false that the Old Testament is where people got saved by obeying the law and in the New Testament people get saved by giving intellectual assent to a list of basic doctrines. This perspective is simply heretical, far removed from the thrust of the Bible. In both testaments obedience from the heart is described as faith, and this is the kind of faith that saves you. It's not a case of believing that Jesus is the Son of God and that He died for peoples sins. Faith and obedience in the Bible absolutely cannot be separated in either the O.T. or the N.T. no matter what the Reformers thought, whether Protestant or Catholic. Recently, at a stratospheric conference, some Lutherans and Catholics agreed together that faith implies obedience and obedience from the heart implies faith. Too bad they didn't talk this over 400 years ago!

There are other reasons for people making distinctions between the O.T. and the N.T. The so called dispensational school detects cultural differences that are significant enough to them to imply theological differences. For them the dispensation of the O.T. is radically different from the dispensation of the N.T. I grew up in that stream of thinking, but the longer I live the more it seems that the *continuities* between the two testaments are much more significant than the *differences*.

In the N.T. one of the major shifts is the departre from the symbolism depicting the slaying of animals for the forgiveness of sin. But it was never true that faith was not essential in the process of animal sacrifices. The O.T. itself often makes that point - that obedience is even better than sacrifice. So this is not the basic distinction between the two testaments but simply a deeper awareness of symbolism which would be significant for both Jew and Gentile.

It is thus true that Christ's sacrifice has been interpreted as a replacement for Jewish sacrifices. But notice this is a replacement of symbol rather than a replacement of meaning.

Also, there is the shift in the N.T. from the misunderstanding of some, that only Jewish people could be saved, to an awareness of the access to God of all peoples. But even this is simply a heightened awareness rather than a distinction. Many gentiles came to God in the O.T..

In any case, we must resist the thought that the Gospel is like a baton

passed from the Jews to the Gentiles and was never really possessed by the Jews. That idea goes along with the thought that somehow true faith was first discovered in the N.T. and is now possessed solely by the Gentiles.

Take a look at Paul's generalization in Romans 9 about the failure of the Jews to attain righteousness:

Rom. 9:30-32:

> What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works.

If we don't understand this we will have a hard time evaluating the eternal prospects of people like Zechariah and Elizabeth or even Mary, the mother of Jesus. Contrary to what some people think, God did not just choose anybody to be the mother of Jesus. When Gabriel said to her, "You have found favor in the sight of God," he wasn't telling her she had won the lottery, but was speaking to someone whose character was appropriate to the assignment that God had for her. She had already, it would appear, the kind of faith that Abraham had who also did not know the details of the substitutionary atonement of the shed blood of Christ.

Challenge 3

In conclusion we can refer back to a previous lesson where we noticed the interrelations between the Jews in captivity in Zoroastrian territory.

This makes for a truly major difference between the OT and the NT. It is very important to realize that is most of the OT things are described in the terms of God's ultimate control over all events - His sovereignty. We do not need to go over that again. We do need to understand that the NT recognition of an intelligent adversary who is in some sense "the God of this world" even after the Cross, is both a major new perspective but also one that is rarely recognized.

In Summary

We can see at least three "challenges" as we seek to understand the NT, 1) the continuity of belief that works against evil, 2) the general question of the continuities and differences between the testaments, and 3) the important and specific difference in the way bad things are described.

Thus, we see the indissoluble unity of the Bible in regard to the relentless purpose of God to reconquer a planet under the control of an evil one, and to recruit men and women to be involved in that task.