

300 Years From Now

Three hundred years from now, people may look at contemporary American Evangelicals and their relation to the Bible the way we look at sixteenth century Roman Catholics and their relation to the pope or church tradition. I often think that we are acting more like Muslims - who have a dictation theory of the inspiration of the Quran - than like Christians, whose best scholars have always rejected the dictation theory of inspiration. Also, we tend to say, "The Bible says..." when we would be more honest saying, "Our systematic theology interprets the Bible to say..." or "Our religious tradition requires us to understand the Bible to mean ..." In other words, I don't think the Bible is the problem, but what we assume about the Bible and how we often use the Bible. As to how to address it, I think that's a complex question that I actually may do some writing about in a year or two. I don't think there's an easy answer, but it's one of the most important questions we face.



I think its best to say about the Bible what it says about itself. But of course, even before we say that, we have to acknowledge that when the Bible was written, the Bible as we know it - 66 books organized as Old Testament and New Testament - didn't exist. It's probably good to let that thought settle in a bit before saying too much more.

Back to what the Bible says about itself - it never says that it has the answer to all of life's problems. It never says it is easy to understand or that a little child could easily understand it - it in fact says something close to the opposite. It never says it's the roadmap to a happy and successful life, or that it's God's little instruction manual, and so on. It does say it is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in right living so that we can be equipped for good works. It does say that it is given for our comfort and encouragement and so that we can face life with hope. It says that it can make us "wise to salvation." That's what I would echo - both theologically, and in my experience.

I think everything in life is spiritual. Going to church is spiritual, and so is going to work. Eating is spiritual, and so is voting. Controlling your sexual urges is spiritual, and so is controlling your buying urges. Not lying is spiritual, and so is not making racist comments. So the tendency to divide life into "spiritual" and "secular" is, I think, a recipe for hypocrisy and bad discipleship.

A lot depends, of course, on how we use the word "politics." If by it people mean partisanship - turning your faith into the religious chaplaincy of a political party, then I would agree: we shouldn't be political. But politics means how

groups of people arrange their lives together - and so it has to do with how we treat other people, and how we treat God's world - and those are matters that are so deeply spiritual that I think faith is inherently political, or else it's bad faith. You can't love God and hate your neighbor - which Jesus, John, Paul, and James all say in one way or another. This means that if you have bad politics, if you don't arrange your life in proper concern for your neighbor and the widow and orphan and stranger and even your enemy - then your love for God is dysfunctional.

What I dream for here in our country is that Christians in each political party let their faith critique their party, and so they call their party to a more and more holistic and just and wise and compassionate agenda. If we do that, we can help our nation fulfill its potential and vocation. As the richest, most

powerful, and most heavily armed nation in the history of history, we have a very serious stewardship to fulfill as voters in a democracy, and if we don't let our faith in the way of Jesus guide us, what will guide us? A conservative or liberal ideology? God help us if that's the case. Actually - God help us period!

Wrath and Hell

The key issue I raise in the book is our assumptions about the big narrative of the Bible. (I avoid the contentious term meta-narrative for reasons I explain in the book.) Once we question the precritical assumptions about the story which the Bible is telling, we suddenly find that specific words take on different meanings - meanings that are more in tune with the Jewish rabbis of Jesus' own people.

The word wrath - which many people assume means "anger that leads to the punishment of eternal conscious torment." But outside of the old narrative, another possibility arises: wrath means God's displeasure that allows people to experience the consequences of their negative actions. Try that out in a reading of Romans 1 and see if you think it fits. So if we neglect the poor, there will be crime and revolutionary movements ... If we neglect our children, they'll feel alienated from us, hurting themselves and us. If we neglect the environment, we'll suffer erosion and global warming. If we worship idols, we'll play to our own baser instincts.

Another powerful example is "righteousness," which I actually think would better be translated "justice" in most cases, and the related word "judgment." Most people assume that righteousness means simple religious rigor, but if righteousness means justice, it integrates personal uprightness with social concern - doing right to my neighbor, enemy, stranger, and so on. And judgment in the conventional narrative means God sending people to hell. But what if ... what if this is based on a mistaken understanding? What if judgment means "setting things right," or "restoring justice?" So for God to come as judge to bring judgment would mean God coming to stop the oppressors from oppressing, the polluters from polluting, the violent from plundering, the greedy from hoarding, etc? It would be good news, not bad news! A short way to say the same thing: we assume justice is merely retributive. But I believe God's justice is far better and richer than that. It is restorative.

The Real Kingdom of God

The good news of the Kingdom of God is, according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Gospel. John would agree - although he translates the phrase "kingdom of God" to "life of the ages" or "life to the full." (The common English translation of "zoien aionian" as "eternal life" is misleading.) A surprisingly large number of committed Christians still assume "kingdom of God" and "life of the ages" mean "life in heaven after you die." This misbelief is one of the most tragic turns in the history of Christian theology, in my opinion. Many others think it means "having a personal relationship with God," which may be a small improvement, but still misses so much.

The metaphor is so rich and revolutionary that it resists reduction into a simple definition. Instead it invites us to multiply metaphors and create parables as Jesus did. As a result, instead of merely trying to nail down what it "is" (a condition where God's will is done on earth as in heaven), we will want to

imaginatively explore what it "is like" (a woman making bread, a man planting seeds, a ruler entrusting stewards with resources, a net catching fish, and so on).

Now "the kingdom of God" isn't the gospel. It's "the good news" of the kingdom of God that is the gospel. And what is that good news? On Jesus' lips, it was that the kingdom of God was "at hand" - which was a way of saying it is near, or here, or available, or a live option - something you can reach out and touch. In other words, the kingdom of God isn't something you simply hope for someday. It is something you come to terms with today. That "coming to terms with" means, for starters, that we repent - we rethink everything in light of this message. And it also means we trust Jesus as the king - so we decide to "take on his yoke," learn his way, and follow him, so we can be like him.

The kingdom of God, Jesus said, was "good news for the poor." There is a personal dimension to the kingdom of God, to be sure, in which we have a personal relationship with the King. But there is also a social dimension to the kingdom of God, a dimension that challenges normal human (and religious) assumptions about peace, war, prosperity, poverty, privilege, responsibility, religion, and God. For Jesus, the kingdom wasn't something we build or advance or expand. It was something we see and enter and receive. To see it, we need to repent and acknowledge how blind we have been, becoming teachable and "young" again, like children. To enter it, we need to become a part of it, and to receive it, we let it become a part of us.

The rest of the New Testament also celebrates the good news of the kingdom of God, although it is less obvious to many readers. The term "Lord," for example, when applied to Jesus, is a kingdom term: Lord (kurios) is the political term applied to the emperor Caesar, head of the kingdom of Rome. So to say "Jesus is Lord" is to say "Caesar isn't the ultimate authority; Jesus is." It's to assert that it's the Pax Christi, not the Pax Romana, that holds hope for the world. Similarly, the term "Christ" means "anointed one," which means "the one God has anointed as king" - which means Jesus is the king God has chosen and on whom God's favor rests, not Caesar. I think we would be wise to re-translate "Christ" as "God's liberating king" to keep this meaning in mind.

Even the term "church" is a kingdom term. "Ekklesia" was a political term that referred to the assemblies of Roman citizens spread across the empire, the population of which consisted of a large majority of non-citizens. In this way, an ecclesia is a gathering of people who identify themselves as citizens of the kingdom of God, living by a higher calling - the way of Jesus and his message of the kingdom. Even the Apocalypse is a kingdom-oriented document. It parodies the Roman imperial system as a beast, and it parodies the religions that support it as a whore and false prophet. It ends with a massive battle in which Jesus defeats the kingdom - not with a literal sword (although depressing numbers of Christians assume this to be the case), but with the sword of his word, meaning his peaceful message of the kingdom of God. In the end, a holy city - a new Rome - comes down from heaven, bringing healing to all the nations of the world. This isn't a story of us evacuating to heaven; it's a story of heaven invading earth and transforming it, saving it, healing it.

What does this mean for us today? How would it affect followers of Christ today - in the US and around the world - if we really "got" the message of the kingdom of God? I believe that it would be revolutionary. Everything would change.

Matthew 7 Re-Framed

The context is not the "soul-sort" question - i.e. who goes to eternal conscious torment and who goes to eternal bliss. The context is the Jewish world of Jesus' day, a nation occupied by the Roman Empire. The assumption is that the status quo is untenable - how could people who believe in one living God be subjugated and humiliated by an empire that believes in many false gods? The scribes and the Pharisees propose one kind of solution to the question - a formula for right or just living (5:17 ff) that focuses on private morality. The underlying assumption is, "If we do a better job obeying the law, God will free us." The zealots propose another - one that focuses on violent political rebellion. The assumption seems to be, "If we would rise up like David against Goliath, God will fight for us and free us."

(The two, it turns out, fit together well, one providing cover for the other. They also share an understanding of "save" or "salvation" that is, I think, far more Jewish and Biblical than our - pardon the word - conventional one: saving is paradigmatically what God did for the Jews in Egypt, and so by extension saving means liberating from evil and oppression in all its forms - social, political, personal, spiritual, etc. BTW, I don't think the ancient Jews would have seen these as discrete categories, but as one holistic salvation.)

Jesus proposes a radical alternative. He lines it out in terms of attitude (5:1-11), identity (5:13-16), interpersonal behavior (5:21 ff - culminating in 4:38 - 48 where he advocates love for enemies), spiritual practices (6:1 ff), economics (6:19 ff), etc.

Then he says (7:13-29 - here's my rough and expanded paraphrase, tying what I think he's saying here with his larger message elsewhere), "If you practice what I'm saying, when the storm of violence comes, your house will stand. But if you reject what I'm saying - if you choose the path of private piety fused with political violence proposed by the scribes, Pharisees, and zealots - you will rebel against Rome and Rome will come in and crush you. Not one stone will be left on another. Your entire way of life centered in temple, sacrifice, priesthood, ethnicity, and holy city will be destroyed. I know what I'm saying sounds impractical and preposterous. Most people will reject it - but that wide road will lead to escalating cycles of violence, ending in destruction. By trying to save your lives by violence, you will lose them; those who live by the sword will die by it. Only a few are willing to explore my alternative path of justice and shalom based on kingdom-of-God attitudes and values (rather than typical Roman attitudes of domination and acquisition), enemy-love (rather than in-grouping 'brothers' and out-grouping 'enemies'), and radical reconciliation (rather than retaliation and revolution)."

I hope that makes sense - again, not expecting you to agree with it, but at least to understand how I honestly read the text. I also think there are other dimensions to salvation, judgment, etc., than this, but if we're going to refer to Matthew 7, I have to start with this understanding until someone shows me a reading that is more true to the text itself. (Here I find myself humbly standing with Luther ...)

Also, Scot, as you said, not to be snarky, if anyone wants to quote Matthew 7 to reinforce the 6-line, soul-sort narrative, they have to deal with the fact that Jesus doesn't say, "Enter through the narrow gate of believing in me as personal Savior, having confidence in the penal substitutionary theory of atonement (I know you and "responsible thinkers" don't say this, but surprisingly many do), identifying as a member of the orthodox Christian religion and disavowing any other religious affiliation, fulfilling your sacramental obligations and avoiding church-indicated mortal sin (or whatever). Otherwise you will experience eternal conscious torment."

According to Matthew 7, who will experience destruction? (Again, in this context, I don't think this means eternal conscious torment: it means exactly what happened in AD 70, the dead end of the broad road of eye-for-eye violence that we continue to follow today.) It will be those who hear "these words of

mine" - indicating, I think you'll agree, first and foremost the words of the sermon on the mount themselves - and do not practice them. The ones who will stand, who will be saved through the storm, who will experience God's shalom, are those who hear and practice Jesus' words. I don't think you can quote Jesus for the outcome (many experience destruction, few life) without also accepting what he says for the means (practicing his teaching). If applied in the soul-sort narrative, this would contradict "justification by grace through faith." My reading avoids that problem. (And many will feel it creates worse problems, I'm sure.)

I don't expect many people to agree with this reading. I'm simply saying this reading makes most sense to me, and to growing numbers of others too. But it requires me to step outside the soul-sort narrative. I don't re-interpret the passage to get out of the narrative - but rather my honest grappling with the Scriptures, especially the Sermon on the Mount but all the gospels with it, has forced me to question the narrative.

This is why, try as I might, I find it hard to make myself clear when people ask me, "Are you a universalist?" My only honest response is, "That question only makes sense when you're living inside a certain narrative. But I don't. For me to answer the question requires me to re-enter a narrative that I think is a huge part of the problem because it keeps us from seeing so much of what Jesus was saying and was doing." I believe that in the end, we all - universally - will face judgment and mercy, because we all will face the living God in whom justice and mercy live in perfect harmony ... the living God who was revealed most fully not in the religious or political authority figures executing judgment, but in the one being executed. I think this gets us close to the true scandal of the cross. I hope that before people rush to condemn this, they will be sure to at least try to understand it. If you reject it after understanding it, that's one thing. But if you reject it without understanding it, we haven't even achieved disagreement. Sometimes, it's not easy to achieve disagreement well!