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Commentary — From the Margins

### The Birth Pains of Spiritual Israel

For nearly two millennia, the good news of the kingdom of heaven has been preached to the people of the world. Early disciples took this “gospel” into the farthest corners of the world. The English literary tradition of the solitary monk in the woods doesn’t come from the Roman Church, but from the Christianity brought to the British Isles in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-Century by disciples largely forgotten. Likewise, when Spanish Conquistadors overran Mexico, they found Amerindians believing a gospel that was close enough to the teachings of the Roman Church that the Conquistadors said the devil had delivered to these peoples a counterfeit gospel, little realizing that six centuries earlier the Bishop to Iceland had taken the gospel of the kingdom of God to the “Western lands.” So, while it cannot be said with certainty that all peoples of the world had received the good news of Christ prior to the modern era of mass communication and worldwide travel, that possibility certainly seems to be the case. And 19<sup>th</sup>-Century missionaries probed the underbellies of the remaining physical wildernesses where the gospel might not have been delivered. The dark heart of Africa heard the good news of Christ’s mighty deeds. The frozen reaches of the Yukon River became home to missionaries. Even the mountain man Joe Meeks preached Christ to the Nez Perce peoples for a bride, as a reformed gospel was taken to peoples converted to a “dead faith of works.” One gospel message wasn’t enough. The right gospel hadn’t been delivered to all nations. This was why the end of the age hadn’t yet come. Another gospel must be proclaimed to all tribes and tongues, and the world evangelism received new life as missionaries “converted” the children and grandchildren of missionaries. The world needed to receive the Protestant gospel instead of the gospel of the Roman Church, or of the Orthodox Church, or of the Coptic Church.

But the end of the age did not occur in the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century. It didn’t occur in 1843, or in 1844, or in 1905, or in 1914, or with the conclusion of World War I. Jesus’ Olivet discourse needed to be rethought. No man of perdition appeared although for a while Hitler seemed to qualify. Clearly, the world had not been reached with the “correct” gospel message.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century, two competing gospels began to be preached. One, the *Holiness Gospel*, devalued the importance of keeping the laws of God, and stressed the experience of receiving the Holy Spirit. God the Father was no longer a stern disciplinarian, but a kindly grandfather. He became *Daddy*, instead of *Father*. The cultural informality of post-war America was transferred to the theology of the Cross. Christianity dressed itself in bobby socks and saddle shoes as it danced to the beat of a different drummer. Hell was still there, but all it took to avoid hell was confessing with one’s mouth that Jesus was Lord.

The other gospel said, *even the demons confess that Jesus is Lord*. This competing gospel insisted that the good news of the soon-coming kingdom of God hadn’t been proclaimed for nineteen centuries, that when this gospel of Christ’s Millennium reign over humanity was preached to the world, the end

would come. And this gospel of Christ's return as the Messiah was proclaimed over radio and television to all nations, and was proclaimed by personal evangelism to most nations.

But the end of the age did not come.

Out of the *Holiness* movement has come the Charismatic Church, which is now beaming its just-believe-&-confess gospel into areas of Asia and Africa (especially the 10-40 window) 19<sup>th</sup>-Century missionaries might have missed. But the Charismatic Church wasn't ready to move aggressively into Eastern Europe when the Iron Curtain rusted away, nor has it been able to effectively evangelize Afghanistan since the Taliban were defeated. Now the liberation of Iraq poses an even greater challenge if the gospel of the kingdom that must be proclaimed to the world before the end comes is the *just-believe* message. But one Christian tradition has the Apostle Peter going to Babylon, and being crucified upside-down there. Certainly Asia Minor and the Middle East had the gospel of the kingdom delivered to these regions by the early Church. Thus, the implication of Christ not yet returning because these regions haven't heard the gospel of the kingdom is that this *just-believe* gospel isn't the message of the primitive faith, but is "another gospel," a gospel contrary to the one preached by the Apostles. If this *just-believe* gospel were the message of the Apostles, then there would be no need to again take it to these regions until half way through seven years of tribulation.

Meanwhile, missionaries of Arian Christianity are taking the gospel of another testament of Christ to the world. Missionaries of another sect of Arian Christianity attempt to correct the name by which Jehovah is worshiped. And these combined missionaries will have greater success than even they anticipate. In the next few years, they will be as spiritually successful as the U.S. military has been in Afghanistan and Iraq—until the man of perdition is revealed, the spiritual creation lags a little behind its physical shadow. So, before the end will come these missionaries will reach all peoples. They might have already reached all peoples, such is the enthusiasm of their missionaries, especially in South America. But still no end has come. And no end will ever come if that end is contingent upon the gospels of Arian Christianity being preached to the world.

How are the words of Christ's Olivet discourse to be read? The translation into English seems correct: "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" (Matt 24:14). The translation seems free of ambiguity. When *this gospel of the kingdom* is preached worldwide, the end of the age will occur. But *Christ* has been preached to the world—and the end of the age has seemed at hand a few times, but it hasn't come. We are all still here. So perhaps, this unambiguous passage needs to be more closely read.

The antecedent for the pronoun phrase, *this gospel*, is in the preceding verse: "But he that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved" (Matt 24:13). So the *good news of the kingdom* that is to be preached to the world before the end can come is, *the person who endures to the end of the age will be saved*. This is indeed good news if enduring isn't living a life of emotional and material prosperity. The linguistic implication of "enduring" is that life will be difficult. So there seems to be more to *this gospel of the kingdom* than merely *enduring*.

The phenomena that reflect directly upon the phrase *enduring* are found in the preceding verses:

Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matt 24:9–13 NRSV)

So *enduring* means surviving being handed over to be tortured and being put to death. It means surviving being hated by all nations because of Christ's name. It means surviving having many fall away, having many betray one another, and having many hate one another. It means surviving the seduction of false prophets, and the increase of lawlessness, and the failing of love. *Enduring* isn't simply keeping on keeping on, as the saying goes. It is something more than doing what a person is doing. It will be a difficult thing to perform, but its performance is required if a person is to be saved. The gospel that must be taken to the world is that salvation requires a person to endure to the end of the age. Halfway to the end isn't good enough.

The carrot Jesus' gospel offers to humanity is that if a disciple will endure to the end, this disciple shall be saved. That is truly good news, for all of humanity will be liberated from spiritual bondage to Satan, the king of spiritual Babylon, halfway through seven years of tribulation. Everyone can come to Him; everyone can be His disciple. The mental barriers have been removed. The call has already gone out (Rev 18:4). No longer will Satan supernaturally deceive humanity (Rev 12:9) by controlling its mental landscape. He is cast to Earth, and he must now deceive individuals one at a time. And he will have considerable success, for he will still control the world's economic systems. But if a person will resist him, and will endure in faith to the end of the age, this person will be in the resurrection of firstfruits.

But why will the world so hate Christ's disciples that they torture and kill them? The question almost seems inane. The world has been torturing and killing disciples since the 1<sup>st</sup>-Century. When has the world not tortured and killed disciples? Yet the linguistic structure of what Jesus said implies changed conditions. Something changes. The fate of disciples isn't the same as it was. If it were, then why hasn't the end of the age come? The gospel of persecution could have been delivered in the 1<sup>st</sup>-Century. Indeed, the Apostles thought they would live to see Christ's return, such were the conditions they faced. Therefore, if linguistic sense is to be made of what Jesus said, there must be the development of deteriorating world conditions that adversely impact disciples. The level of persecution and martyrdom isn't the same as before. The level of the hatred isn't the same. The level of betrayal isn't the same. *Enduring* has become more difficult, and is actually something special, something that separates disciples into two categories, saved and lost.

There is one event that lies ahead of humanity that will cause the world to hate spiritual Israelites as it has never hated anyone: that event is the death of all firstborns not covered by the blood of the Lamb on a future, second Passover night. Not only will the firstborns of the world be killed, the firstborns of spiritual Israel will be slain if those firstborns are not covered by the blood of the Lamb of God. So betrayal of spiritual brothers is almost inevitable, considering that most Christian denominations do not observe the Passover. Disciples who didn't keep

this future Passover will turn upon those that did. These same disciples will turn against their teachers who didn't convey the spiritual importance of the Passover to their flocks. Christianity will experience both the wrath of the world, and its own self-inflicted wrath—and the wrath of the Father still lies ahead.

This endtime gospel of *salvation goes to whomever endures in faith until Christ returns in power* is an easy gospel to preach. The Church is the woman who will bear many sons and daughters in glory; she is the second Eve, betrothed to the second Adam, impregnated by the Holy Spirit, and about to give birth. She was, centuries ago, deceived by Satan just as, in Eden, the first Eve was deceived by the serpent. Both swallowed the lie that she would not die if she ate forbidden fruit. The penalty was that she would receive pain in childbirth, and that her desire would be for her husband. Certainly, spiritual Eve's desire is Christ. Her desire is nothing more than to be with Christ. And she will experience pain in childbirth—the Tribulation is that pain. But those who endure this pain will be saved. Those who endure will be the teachers of liberated spiritual Egyptians half way through the seven years of travail. And the endtime gospel that must be preached is no more complicated than endure and be saved. A person has no immortal soul. A person doesn't receive eternal life except as the gift of God. A person won't be raptured until glorified at Christ's return. The Church goes nowhere. Christians will be here on Earth experiencing their own spiritual birth pains, because they haven't believed God unto obedience. Their desire is Christ, but they don't want to be ruled by Him. So, guess what, they will learn to be ruled by Him, or they will accept the mark of the beast. They will not have endured, and they will go into the lake of fire.

Indeed, the endtime gospel is easy to teach, but two-thirds of the Church will not believe it. And apparently, a third of that remaining third will not bear spiritual fruit and will join the rebels in the lake of fire. Jesus' parables suggest that only twenty percent of the Church will be in covenant with Him when He returns, so enduring really becomes much more important than just desiring Christ. Enduring begins with believing in faith unto obedience, then continues on to teaching others to believe unto obedience. And this gospel hasn't been preached since Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives.

But after most of twenty centuries, the gospel that will bring this age to a close has begun going to the world.

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