

# **THE GOSPELS, THE KINGDOM, AND US**

**1 Corinthians 13:9-12; Acts 14:22; 19:8; 28:23 and 31; Romans 14:17; Colossians 4:11; Revelation 1:6 and 9**

**Why Systems Can Never Substitute for Scripture**

**By**

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## Opening.

When I think back over the many exhortations I received through the years of my theological training to, “Get out of the Gospels!,” I am mystified and amazed. A basic, bedrock rule of Bible study, of textual analysis, is that a verse, a passage, a letter written to a specific group of people in a specific geographical locale living in a specific cultural context, *cannot* mean one thing to those who originally received it and another thing to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. **Interpretation always precedes application.** There is one simple, straightforward and strategic meaning of the text in light of the history and culture in which it was written {interpretation}; there may be limitless ways in which the Followers of Jesus put that “**into practice**” in their own lives and times down the long hall of His-Story {application}.

## Canon or Completion?— An Illustration of Interpretation.

E.g., in 1 Corinthians 13:9 where Paul say’s, “**for we know in part and we prophesy in part**”— speaking of his day in the Age of Grace and the gifts of the Spirit for the founding of the Church {He just said in v. 8, “**Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away,**” stressing the permanence of the Spirit’s love over the impermanence of the Spirit’s gifts}— “**but ...when perfection comes** [or ‘the perfect,’ NAS], **the imperfect disappears.**” For years I taught that “**perfection,**” or “**the perfect**” with the definite article, was a reference to the completed Canon of Scripture. Why? Because it was what I was taught in my Biblical training and it fit my theological paradigm, plus we needed those particular “**gifts**”— of “**prophecy, tongues,**” and “**knowledge**”— to be gone ...by the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century at the latest! And, as you can see from Paul’s instruction, they were meant to be transient as opposed to everlasting. But that’s not even my point here. The more I’ve studied that passage over the years and the more I’ve looked into the simple nuances of context and culture, there is simply no way this referring to a gathering up of Holy Spirit-inspired material from the “**apostles and prophets**” of the 1<sup>st</sup> century in a final form can be an accurate understanding of what Paul’s saying.

Again, the standard principle of interpretation when studying Scripture is that a given verse, passage, or chapter cannot mean one thing to its original audience and something different, something foreign or alien to them, to you and I. If you were to speak to the Corinthian Community about a ‘completed canon of Scripture’ {which comes from the Greek *kanon*, which means basically- a ‘straight rod’ or ‘stick by which things are measured’}, or even a ‘canon of Scripture,’ they would have no idea what you were talking about. Nowhere in the Corinthian minds or imaginations would this idea have existed that the letter they were reading, penned by the hand of the apostle Paul and intended to deal with pressing spiritual circumstances which they as a Body of Believers were facing, would someday be put together with his other letters, as well as those of Peter, John, Luke, James, Matthew and Mark to form an authoritative and accepted *Kanon* for Followers of Jesus {New Testament}, just as the Jews had one for Judaism {Old Testament}. Nobody would have even used the term *kanon* in this way in the 1<sup>st</sup> century; it wasn’t until late in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century that this term came to be used in the context of Christian Community as the *rule of faith*, meaning ‘truth revealed by God.’

So, if it's a ludicrous interpretation for the early Church, why does it become acceptable now? It doesn't; and that's the point.

Paul then moves on in this passage to an illustration from his life, growth, and experience as they unfolded in Time saying, **“When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.”** Notice the temporal contrasts in v. 12. **“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror....”** Corinth was a seaport city, fabulously wealthy from its trade to both sides of the Mediterranean, the Corinthian Gulf on the west and the Saronic Gulf on the east, a city renowned for its mirrors of highly polished Corinthian bronze. These ancient mirrors had to be polished constantly to maintain any semblance of shine and reflection, thus Paul's terminology of **“poor reflection”** and ‘partial knowledge.’ **“Then we shall see face to face. Now [in this moment, in this day, in this Age] I know in part; then [in the Eternity to come] I shall know fully, even as I am fully known,”** 1 Corinthians 13:9-12 {NIV}. He means with the kind of completeness, the kind of perfection, the kind of all-knowing which *Abba* has about me right now, His unbelievably intimate knowledge of my heart and life, my manners and motivations.

Paul, under the inspiration of the Spirit, paints this magnificent picture of a deeply relational reality to come. He illustrates it by the temporal adverb **“then,”** from the Greek *tote*. This moment is **“now,”** that Day is **“then”** ...and **“then”** is the presence of **“perfection.”** A reference to either the Return of the King or Eternity itself. Notice the temporal aspect of the *immediate context*: what we experience **“now”** with what we'll experience **“then”**— **“face to face”** with the Lord of Glory. So, we're talking about the Time beyond all Time, **“perfection”** personified. What we're not talking about, clearly, is when the last letter of the NT was written.

And why? Because the last letter of our agreed upon and accepted Canon for the NT in Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox circles, was written somewhere around 96 AD and yet we still, to this day, **“see but a poor reflection”** and not like we will **“face to face”** in the presence of Jesus. Even though you have a fully-fleshed Bible {from *biblion*, or ‘scroll’} in your hands, available in as many translations as you could possibly imagine, anybody **“know”** God **“fully”** and completely, other people fully and completely, yourself fully and completely... even as you are **“fully known”**? It's ridiculous to even ask. We are finite creatures with a finite understanding. Even the most brilliant among us, aided by the insight of the Spirit, can peer only so far into the depths of the divine, the deep waters of *Abba's* unfathomable essence.

Here's how TLB translates this. **“Now we know so little, even with our special gifts, and the preaching of those most gifted is still so poor. But when we have been made perfect and complete, then the need for these inadequate special gifts will come to an end, and they will disappear. It's like this: when I was a child I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child does. But when I became a man my thoughts grew far beyond those of my childhood, and now I have put away the childish things. In the same way, we can see and understand only a little about God now, as if we were peering at His reflection in a poor mirror; but someday we are going to see Him in His completeness, face to face. Now all that I know is hazy and blurred, but then [in a Time beyond Time, in the presence of God] I will see everything**

**clearly, just as clearly as God sees into my heart right now,”** 13:9-12 {TLB}.

### **Essay— The Gospels, the Kingdom, and What They Mean to the Sons of God.**

Now, along these same lines, let's take our bedrock rule of Biblical interpretation and apply it to history, to the Followers of Jesus in the earliest Church. Can you imagine, even for a moment, anybody who called themselves a disciple of Jesus in the first or second centuries, desperate to know Him better in order to love Him deeper— hungry for His words and deeds, His actions and attitudes— when the little Community of Faith to which they belong finally receives a copy of the Gospel of Mark {the earliest}, or Luke, or Matthew, or John {the latest}, saying, “Well, you know, this is all fine and good, now we actually have in our hands the historical account of the King of all Creation— how He thought, how He taught, how He spoke, how He healed, how He prayed and lived in constant communion with His *Abba*— *but ...I'm not really interested in this. I don't think this applies to me, or to any of us really. I mean, we've got the letters of Paul, Peter, and John, do we really need the teaching of Jesus?*”

Can you imagine any believing member of the Body of Christ in, say, the first thousand years of Christianity saying, “What Jesus taught His Disciples is so radically different from the Apostles, I'll just stick with them. This Jesus-stuff is just *too hard* to understand.” No, you can't, cause it makes no sense whatsoever. This is the Son of God we're talking about, the One whom the Samaritans called “**the Savior of the World**” {Jn. 4:42}. Can you see anybody, any of our Brotherhood in the 1<sup>st</sup> century setting aside the Gospels, tossing out these incredible accounts of Jesus' Life, Message, Mission and Ministry? Anybody? I seriously, seriously doubt it. And neither should we.

Maybe it's not the understanding that's the problem, but the walking in we're afraid of; maybe it's not the faith, but the Life we're stumbling over. “Oh yes, I believe Jesus said it and I believe it was true. *Then, just not now.* I believe He said it and I believe it's true, I just have no intention whatsoever of putting it ‘**into practice**’ {Matt. 7:24}.” Well, we know what the Son of God said concerning that little issue in Matthew 7:24-29, don't we? “**Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the Rock. ...But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand,**” vv. 24 and 26.

### **The Kingdom Is Now ...But Not Yet.**

What seems to be a stumbling block to many Dispensational scholars— and what they don't seem to want to deal with— is this idea of the “**Kingdom of God.**” I believe the early Church understood a fundamental reality that our convoluted theological ‘systems’ have lost sight of: with Jesus' Advent into Creation *the Kingdom had come*, in His Person, His Ministry, His Miracles, the rule and reign of God had come crashing in to the kingdoms of this world and the tyranny of Satan. His Kingdom was an ever-present reality of which the later writers spoke as well. John quoting Jesus speaking to a highly educated religious Jew, said that “**no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again,**

**born from above**” {Jn. 3:3}; in the preaching and teaching of the **“Kingdom of God”** as a prominent and powerful theme throughout the Book of Acts {1:3; 8:12; 14:22 (**“through many tribulations [thlipsis] we must enter the Kingdom of God”**); 19:8 (Paul **“arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of God”**); 28:23 and 31 (**“boldly and without hindrance,”** meaning ‘freely and fearlessly,’ **“he preached the Kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ”**)}.

Paul speaks of God’s Kingdom in the same dynamic tension which Jesus does, as powerfully present but not yet fully come— the ‘now but the not yet,’ here yet also future in its final form— **“for the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit”** {Rom. 14:17}, **“not a matter of talk but of power”** {1 Cor. 4:20}, that place which God has **“brought us into”** when He **“rescued us from the dominion of darkness”** {Col. 1:13}; Peter speaks of receiving a **“rich welcome into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”** {1 Pet. 1:11}; and John in the Revelation say’s Jesus **“has made us [aorist = at a particular point ( . ) in Time, indicative = a completed reality] to be a Kingdom and Priests to serve His God and Father...,”** identifying himself as our **“brother and companion in the suffering and Kingdom and patient endurance which are ours in Jesus”** {Rev. 1:6 and 9}. At the end of his Letter to Colossae, Paul mentions several men and says, **“These are the only Jews among my fellow-workers for the Kingdom of God”** {4:11}: the point being that this was something for which Paul was laboring *right now*, in the present. Yet he also understands that its fullest and final form is still to come one Day— in God’s own impeccable timing, following the *Parousia*.

It’s an absurd proposition to believe that it’s okay for us to turn our backs on the teaching of Jesus when nobody in the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and possibly 16 centuries to follow would have even dreamed of doing so {the theological system which promotes this was born in the 1830s}. So, what is our role, our responsibility toward the Kingdom of Christ, the Kingdom over which He is presently ruling at the right hand of God, and in which the Church, as His Body in Time and Bride in Eternity, is His primary instrument of love and deliverance— holding out to the world the offer of temporal Freedom and Eternal Life?

## **Finale.**

In the OT we have *preparation* for Messiah’s Ministry; in the Gospels we have *presentation* of the Messiah’s Message; and in the Acts—the Revelation we have *appropriation* of the Messiah’s Mission. His Mission is now ours as His Followers in the Faith; the Master ascends to the Father and passes on to His Apprentices both the responsibility and the authority to extend the boundaries of His Kingdom and set the captives of Satan free. Remember what He said in Matthew 28:18-20? **“All authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to Me.... And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the Age.”** We have the promise of His *presence* and, therefore, His *power* to execute that mission with great wisdom and with great love!

So, what do we do with all this: the fullness of divine revelation in the NT? We embrace

the fuller revelation of faith offered us in the Epistles, the Resurrection Power of Jesus through a passionate relationship with the Holy Spirit, and we walk in these *without* turning our backs on the beauty of the Gospels. What Jesus taught, especially in the Discourse on the Hill and the Sermon on the Plain— Matthew 5-7 and Luke 6— is *meant* to be lived by the citizens of His Kingdom. Now, are we *disciples* or are we *dilettantes*? Are we Followers of the Way or just dabblers in the Faith, the part-time people of God? It's time we made up our minds.