

They thought and acted as though the Kingdom consisted of a religious observance of outward show, and in so doing “shut the kingdom of heaven against men” and suffered not “those who would enter to go in” (Mt. 23:13, RSV). By contrast, Jesus goes on to say that the day of the Son of man (that is, his return and Kingdom) will be openly seen, “as the lightning that lighteneth out of the one part under heaven, shineth unto the other part under heaven” (Lk. 17:24). It will be evident to all that the time of Christ’s rule and Kingdom has begun.

Sometimes it is suggested that, inasmuch as “the fruit of the Spirit” or “the spirit of Christ” is within us, then, in a sense, the Kingdom of God is ‘within us’. It seems to the present writer that caution is needed here, for the use of such lan-

guage can be confusing. Certainly we should be cultivating spiritual qualities in our lives, and developing Christlike minds. Of that there is no doubt, and such virtues will be perfected in the Kingdom; but to turn this round and say this is ‘in a sense’ the Kingdom now, is to take a step which the Scriptures do not, and deflects our vision away from the Bible definition of God’s Kingdom. On this basis, we could argue that all things in our life should have a bearing on, or are leading to, the Kingdom of God, and that therefore the Kingdom of God is here now. A glance at the world (and at ourselves) manifestly declares that God’s Kingdom is not yet in existence; but let us take courage in the fact that we are “heirs of the kingdom which He hath promised to them that love Him” (Jas. 2:5).

Simeon Guntrip

“We preach Christ crucified”

Mark Vincent

Part 1: A message concealed

THE GOSPEL of Mark, conventionally assumed to be the earliest of the Gospels, begins with a clear and unambiguous statement of the unique status of the Lord Jesus: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus [the] Christ, the Son of God” (1:1).

In these simple words Mark asserts two things that are of basic importance to our study. He asserts that Jesus is the promised Messiah (Hebrew) or Christ (Greek), the special ‘anointed one’ who was to come, the one who would perfectly fulfil the kingly, priestly and prophetic roles that Old Testament anointing implies. And he asserts that Jesus is the Son of God, with all which *that* implies. One could not wish for a more straightforward statement of these two crucial facts about Jesus, two facts which pick him out from all other men who have ever existed.

Disappearing terms

But it is remarkable that after this initial statement of Mark 1:1 these two titles of Jesus—Christ and Son of God—are more notable by their absence in Mark’s narrative than by their presence. Indeed, the term ‘Christ’ does not occur again until Mark 8, and then disappears from the record once more until towards the end of the Gospel.¹

It is not until the last week of Jesus’s life that the term begins to be used with any regularity.²

Something similar can be said of the title Son of God. Apart from one or two sporadic occurrences elsewhere, it is only at the beginning of the Gospel and in the Passion narrative that the designation is applied to our Lord.³ It is after the death and resurrection of Jesus that these terms are used openly and frequently in the rest of the New Testament.⁴

This connection between the titles Christ and Son of God and the death and resurrection of Jesus is not fortuitous or something being

1. There is one exception: Mark 9:41. Jesus is clearly addressing his disciples at this point, so the pattern is not broken.
2. The distribution of the occurrences in Mark 12–16 (and in the parallel accounts in the other Synoptic Gospels) is also instructive, though can only be hinted at here. In several passages Jesus is not identifying himself explicitly with Messiah (note his reluctance to answer in Luke 22:67), and it is only after the high priest’s question that he is attacked or mocked for claiming to be Christ.
3. A similar story again holds for the other Synoptic Gospels.
4. John is a special case, not to be examined here.

imposed on the text. It can be confirmed through a quick examination of Mark 8, the stray passage in the body of Mark's Gospel in which Jesus is referred to by the title Christ: "and by the way [Jesus] asked his disciples . . . Whom do men say that I am? . . . And he saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Peter answereth and saith unto him, Thou art the Christ . . . And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (vv. 27-31).

Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ is followed almost immediately by a statement from Jesus that he is to suffer and die. Jesus is deliberately connecting Peter's confession and the title Christ with his Passion.

What, then, is going on? Why should Mark introduce us to the Messiah and Son of God so unequivocally at the beginning of his Gospel, only to let these very terms, which he evidently considered to be so defining of Jesus, disappear from his account? Clearly there is something about these terms that cannot be fully grasped or appreciated until one has come face to face with Jesus's suffering, death and resurrection. These facts are *defining* what the titles Messiah and Son of God really mean.

It is important to see this phenomenon as part of a consistent theme in Mark's Gospel: the so-called 'Messianic secret'. Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Son of God, but for a time in Jesus's ministry this was to be kept hidden or secret. Indeed, the very episode of Peter's confession introduces us to this theme in a verse which was not quoted above and which precedes Jesus's forecast of his sufferings: "Peter answereth and saith unto him, Thou art the Christ. And he charged them that they should tell no man of him" (vv. 29,30).

Peter was right: Jesus was the Christ. But the disciples were to tell no man of it—at least for the time being. Mark reflects this fact by the very distribution of the Messianic titles Christ and Son of God in his Gospel. It is a telling harmony and a matter we must explore further.

The Messianic secret

The concept of a 'Messianic secret' is found in each of the Synoptic Gospels (along with similar distributions of Messianic titles as noted above for Mark), but it is Mark who brings the theme out most strongly. In what follows attention will be confined to his Gospel.

There are three types of material through which Mark develops his theme of a 'Messianic secret'. The first group of passages relates to Jesus's miracles of exorcism. Jesus forbids demons to speak, and in each case this silencing of the demon is connected with the identification of Jesus:

"and [the man with an unclean spirit] cried out, saying . . . what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? art thou come to destroy us? *I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God.* And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Hold thy peace, and come out of him. And when the unclean spirit had torn him, and cried with a loud voice, he came out of him" (1:23-26);

"And [Jesus] healed many that were sick of divers diseases, and cast out many devils; and suffered not the devils to speak, *because they knew him*" (v. 34);

"And unclean spirits, when they saw him, fell down before him, and cried, saying, *Thou art the Son of God.* And he straitly charged them that they should not make him known" (3:11).

These three passages demonstrate that when the demons either did, or were about to, cry aloud concerning the *identity* of Jesus (as chosen Messiah, Son, or Holy One of God), he commanded them not to speak and make him known. Conversely, when the identity of Jesus was not an issue there was no such command to silence when Jesus drove out demons. We can see this from passages such as 7:24-30; 9:14-29: the issue of identity does not arise in these passages, and correspondingly we find no command to silence.⁵ Jesus was concerned that his full identity, perceived by the demons, should not be made known.

In the second group of passages Jesus forbids the disciples from making known his identity and special things which they had seen. We have already witnessed the classic instance of this in Mark 8:30, but there is another: "And as they came down from the mountain [of transfigura-

5. Mark 5:1-20, the Gadarene swine incident, seems to be the only exception. Jesus was with his disciples at that time, and the swine-keepers would have been some distance away (v. 11) since Legion was so dangerous. Thus we can perhaps surmise that there was no one to hear Legion's identification of Christ (v. 7), and Jesus had no need to command silence. Instead he simply heals the man right away.

tion], he charged them that they should tell no man what things they had seen, till the Son of man were risen from the dead" (9:9).

In the third group, Jesus forbids those who have been healed, or witnessed a healing, from spreading the news:

"And he charged them straitly that no man should know it; and commanded that something should be given her to eat" (5:43);

"And he straitly charged him, and forthwith sent him away; and saith unto him, See thou say nothing to any man: but go thy way, shew thyself to the priest" (1:43,44);

"And he charged them that they should tell no man: but the more he charged them, so much the more a great deal they published it" (7:36).

What might be the reason for this 'secret'? Several possibilities have been suggested, including the view that Jesus really meant the opposite, but that, human nature being what it is, knew that if he told people not to tell the message they would be all the more likely to spread it. Though this was indeed the effect of the silence command in some instances, it would not seem to be the most convincing explanation.

Another option is that Jesus wished to emphasise the *individual's* responsibility to come to an understanding and make a decision for himself or herself as to who Jesus was. Men and women were not encouraged to declare publicly Jesus's identity as Messiah and Son of God. They were instead to make an individual judgement for themselves, whilst letting others come to their own conclusions. Whether or not to believe and confess Jesus as Messiah was and is a life-or-death decision. Jesus wanted men and women to confront the evidence for themselves and to make their own decision, not have someone else's decision passed on for them.

A suffering Messiah

But there is more to be said, for we must think in terms of the expectation of the Jewish people at that time. The first two of our three categories of evidence were explicitly concerned with this issue of identity; those who knew who Jesus was (that is, the promised Messiah) were not to tell others. For much of his ministry it appears that Jesus did not want the titles Christ and Son of God bandied about.

The reason for this was that these were highly loaded terms in Jewish thinking. As loaded terms always do, they brought with them a whole host

of expectations and assumptions, many of which were misguided. Yes, the Jews were expecting a 'Messiah', but there are many types of Messiah one may expect, and many possible definitions of the term. Jewish literature from the period shows that Messianic expectation covered a whole spectrum of views; and, as is frequently and correctly observed amongst us, many Jews, including the disciples, were expecting a kingly and military Messiah who as a vigorous nationalist would lead them against Rome.

These considerations form an important step in perceiving why Jesus would be reluctant to be identified by these terms at this time, even though they were true and correct terms to use in one sense. If Jesus's closest disciples could not get the concept of his sufferings into their heads, despite his clear and unambiguous explanations, then there was little chance for the rest of the people. The profuse use of terms such as 'Christ' and 'Son of God' would only add to the difficulty, and fuel the mistaken expectations of so many at that time.

Preconceptions are a very dangerous thing, for they can blind us horribly to the most basic truths that we ought to perceive. There can be little doubt that common preconceptions about the nature of the Messiah at that time would only have made Jesus's task of fulfilling the *true* Messianic role even harder. After all, there are other Gospel incidents which show that, even without these terms, the people were eager to make him king.

Thus, when Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, he is absolutely right, but Jesus does not wish this claim to be spread abroad at this stage. Even the disciples, let alone the nation as a whole, had little concept of a suffering Messiah. The incident of Mark 8 goes on to demonstrate this: Jesus follows up his command to silence with a forecast of his sufferings, and a satanic Peter is quick to rebuke him.

The *true* concept of a Christ and Son of God was of one who laid down his life in suffering for the people he was to redeem, and one who would take it up again in glorious resurrection. This is why these very terms come to the fore when we come to the Passion Week and the resurrection, and when we move beyond into the rest of the New Testament. It is only through these events that the true role of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God may be perceived. They are defining of him. Without the sacrifice a kingly Messiah would be of no use.

The suffering and death of Christ illustrated that popular opinion and expectation was completely wrong. The sort of Messiah and Son of God that humans would have chosen for themselves was not in the first instance the sort of Messiah that God had chosen (and how typical that is of the gulf between God and man!). A

human conception of the Son of God would not be of one who would be asked to lay down his life for his friends, but in the events of Jesus's death and resurrection the secret of God's true Messiah—God's 'Messianic secret'—would be revealed, not according to the wisdom of man, but according to the wisdom of God.

Part 2: A secret revealed and proclaimed

WE shift forward in time now to the period *after* the suffering, death and resurrection. Suddenly everything has changed. Forgiveness of sins has been secured, and the righteousness of God has been proclaimed. God has sent forth His Son as a sacrifice for sin, and that Son, a man like his brethren yet so unlike them, has died to accomplish what his Father had willed. Now there is no hesitancy in using the term 'Messiah' or 'Christ', for what God's Messiah is has been openly proclaimed before the whole world, and Jesus's return as Judge and King has been secured.

Until his life had been given, there was always the possibility of failure on Jesus's part; but such was the case no longer, for God's Son had triumphed and showed himself worthy of the One Who had sent him. The terms 'Christ' and 'Son of God' are now to be found on every hand. As Peter put it, "those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all His prophets, that Christ should suffer, He hath so fulfilled" (Acts 3:18).⁶ The 'Messianic secret' of Jesus's ministry has been totally reversed, and Jesus's identity as the Christ who suffered, died and rose again is to be proclaimed from the housetops.

Christ, and him crucified

In drawing out the implications of all this, it will be useful to review what we have already seen. In explanation of the dual conundrum we set ourselves (the relative absence of the title Christ in the Gospel, and the reason for Jesus's commands to keep his identity secret), two points in particular have emerged. The first is an historical explanation: 'Christ' was a loaded term, which carried with it false expectations and misunderstandings amongst the people at that time that could have been a hindrance to Jesus's ministry.

The second is a more theological explanation: to understand what Christ is we have to understand his passion, death and resurrection. Un-

less we have come face to face with the cross—'the cross' being simply a convenient shorthand for the sufferings of Christ and all that they imply—then we will not really have begun to grasp Jesus's role as Messiah. His sufferings are essential and defining to his role as Christ, and they are the gateway to his future role as King. We must not only be able to recite these things as facts. We must be touched and moved by them.

When we begin to think along these lines, light is shed on Paul's emphasis on the cross in writing to the Corinthians: "For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).

Jesus is the promised Christ who suffered and died for us. This fact lies at the very core of the gospel message:

"For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God . . . For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe . . . but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God" (1:17-24).

Paul did not merely preach a Christ who would return to be King over God's Kingdom. He taught what for so many at that time would have been a simple contradiction in terms: a *Christ* who was *crucified*. The paradox of this is hard to re-create for us today, who are so familiar with it, but rediscover it we must if we are to

6. Compare the connection Jesus himself twice draws between the term Christ, or Messiah, and his explanation of his sufferings in Luke 24:26,46.

appreciate the utter uniqueness and power of God's plan, which is not according to the wisdom of the world, but the wisdom of God.

All this implies that the sufferings of Christ should receive a most prominent place in our gospel teaching, for his suffering and exaltation lies at the very heart of the gospel message. Without it, Christ is not Christ; there can be no kingly Messiah and no salvation without a Messiah who suffered. This was why Paul determined to know nothing but Christ, and him crucified.

Do we preach the cross sufficiently?

But what of ourselves? To my mind our study raises an essential question: do we really emphasise the things concerning Jesus Christ—of which his sufferings are obligatory and definitive—sufficiently in our week-by-week preaching?⁷

My personal experience has been that the Passion of Christ is something that does not always receive as much coverage in our preaching as it should. One must always be wary of generalisation, but it would seem that we are happier, perhaps, talking about the coming Kingdom. When we do talk of Christ, it may more often be of his *nature* rather than his sufferings that we speak.⁸ Yet the preaching of Jesus as Messiah, a role that cannot be understood without facing his sufferings, is absolutely critical. It is a paradox to end all paradoxes that one who is Messiah should have needed to suffer in this way; and when we face this we will have begun to come to grips with the obscenity of human sin on the one hand and the utter graciousness of God on the other.

Now, what might be the reasons why the lack of focus on Christ's suffering and sacrificial work that I have suggested may sometimes manifest itself in preaching? I can think of at least two, both of them operating primarily at the subconscious level.

One is the feeling that the topic of Christ's sufferings is such an emotional one that it is more suited to us who are already 'within', and may be most appropriately treated in exhortation or devotional meetings. Preaching, we might subconsciously think, should be a more combative or adversarial enterprise, in which facts are presented and reasoned arguments are built up to convince our hearers. This, it must be pointed out, misses the crucial point that the cross of Christ, when sensitively and powerfully explained, *is itself convincing and able to convert,*

and that reasoned argument is necessary to preach it well. The teaching of the cross of Christ is astonishing in today's world, just as it was then. That a man should love, suffer and give to *this* extent is revolutionary in today's world of greed and self-seeking, and can overturn our every cynicism and preconception.

A second reason for minimising focus on the sufferings and sacrifice of Christ may be an assumption that our target audience will already know about it. Our teaching on this topic may seem to have more in common with the teaching of the other churches, and this may seem to obviate us from the need to emphasise it so much. However, even if this were true (which it probably is not⁹), we ought not merely to emphasise points of difference between ourselves and other churches in our preaching. We ought instead to preach the whole truth, endeavouring to put our emphasis where the Bible emphasises, irrespective of what others may be doing. Preaching is not an exercise in *self*-definition, the demarcating of *ourselves* from others who may appear to the less well-informed to be preaching similar things to ourselves. Preaching is about spreading the good news of *Christ* and of the *Kingdom of God*. Our focus should be on what God wants us to say, not on what others may or may not be saying.

The story of the Christadelphian who is asked what he believes and responds, "I don't believe in the Trinity, or the immortal soul, or in going to heaven on death", is a well-known cliché. Yet brothers and sisters still do it, and it is very easy to be caught in the act oneself. We need to get back to basics, to think about what the essence of the gospel is, and to ensure that this is what we are teaching, prominently and with conviction: the things concerning the Kingdom of God, and the things concerning Jesus Christ.

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7. Another vital element of our preaching is "the things concerning the kingdom of God", but it seems to me we are in less danger of neglecting this. On these dual aspects as a summary of the gospel message see Acts 8:12; 28:23,31, for example, and hence our publications, such as *The Declaration*.
 8. We must continue our thoroughly correct emphasis on the Kingdom, and one cannot begin to understand the pivot of the sacrifice and exaltation of Christ without a discussion of his nature.
 9. Our Biblical understanding of the nature of Christ ensures that our conception of his sacrifice and exaltation is completely different from and more beautiful than the message of mainstream Christianity.

A mystery revealed

There are a number of New Testament passages that speak of the mystery of the gospel. But the point of all these passages is that the mystery is mystery no longer. The mystery has now been revealed, for the Son of God has come and done all that the Lord required of him. The mystery of Christ is something that the New Testament tells us had been hid for a very long time. Only the most perceptive 'saw Christ's day', and even then not with the clarity for which they would have longed. But suddenly the tables have turned. The mystery that has been hidden has been proclaimed before the world.¹⁰ The Messianic secret is secret no longer, and Christ's identity can—no, *must*—be proclaimed.

In this way our ministry contrasts with that of the apostles during the earthly ministry of Jesus, but chimes melodically with what Jesus com-

manded them *after* his resurrection. It chimes too with the connection drawn by the rest of the New Testament between the gospel message and the identity of Christ as God's suffering Saviour who has now been exalted to His right hand and will return as King. It is a message which had once been hid, but which must be hid no longer. The mystery must be proclaimed, and it is our challenge to proclaim it. The Apostle Paul spoke out about the gospel of Christ at every opportunity. As we have already seen, he determined to know nothing but Christ, and him crucified, and he resolved to proclaim this throughout the world. It is up to us to follow Jesus's command in whatever small way we can: "Go, and do thou likewise".

10. See Romans 16:25 and Colossians 4:3, and compare usage elsewhere in Colossians and also in Ephesians.

"In hope of eternal life"

Tony Benson

THE TITLE of this article comes from Titus 1:2,3: ". . . in hope of eternal life, which God, That cannot lie, promised before the world began; but hath in due times manifested His word through preaching". God created man in order that he should become immortal; and, despite the coming of death upon the human race through sin, this remains His purpose.

The gospel message, therefore, holds out the prospect of immortality, not as of right, but by God's grace; not to all, but to those who are prepared to accept and follow the way God has laid down. The gospel message primarily provides hope for the future rather than the prospect of blessings in this life. It is true that "godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come" (1 Tim. 4:8), but this must be considered in the light of 1 Corinthians 15:19: "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable". The undoubted blessings which the Truth gives us in this life cannot be separated from hope of better things to come; without that hope there would be a huge hole in our lives, a lack of point to them.

Eternal and immortal

At this point some analysis of what we mean when we speak of eternal life is called for. It

does, of course, mean living for ever, but there is more to it than that. Would we want to live for ever as we are now? Some of us are subject to various ailments, perhaps requiring regular treatment, perhaps suffering pain. All of us have to strive against those promptings to sin which arise from our weak natures. Moreover, the world in which we live is full of evil and wickedness, and to live for ever in such an environment is surely not a prospect to delight the heart.

There is thus much more to eternal life than simply living for ever. It also involves a quality of life which far exceeds that which we enjoy today, however good the health we enjoy and however well blessed we are in the things of this life. The life we look forward to in hope is one of freedom for ever from all pain and suffering, of freedom for ever from the sin-prone nature we now bear. Furthermore, we look forward to enjoying that life in an environment free from sin, and from the consequences of sin, which so deface the earth today; we look for a new world where all is in harmony with the great Creator.

Eternal life is thus a matter of quantity, that is, never ending, and also of quality. We show in the table opposite the Greek words which are used in the New Testament regarding eternal life. They can be divided into three groups: