

Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God: A New Testament Perspective[†]

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I "Your Kingdom Come" in The Lord's Prayer

The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches has well framed the question of contemporary meaning and relevance of the idea of the "Kingdom of God" as follows: "When we pray 'Your kingdom come' what are we praying for?" The aim of this paper is to attempt a brief exploration of the meaning of the expression "kingdom of God"—and of other words and expressions which imply the same reality—in the teaching of Jesus within the wider framework of the New Testament and to gain from this exercise insights which may help us in a contemporary and relevant interpretation of this expression for our own day.

What are we praying for when we pray "Your kingdom come"? In trying to answer this question we must first of all note that just as "Thy kingdom come" is intimately connected with "Hallowed be thy name"¹ so is it also intimately connected with the petition "Thy will be done" which follows it (Mt. 6:9-10). These three petitions of the Lord's Prayer should be taken together as a unity and we should not hesitate to consider these as asking for a single thing prayed for in the last of the three petitions, "Thy will be done." The words "Thy kingdom come" can be understood as another way of saying "Thy will be done." "There is a sense in which the Kingdom comes whenever and wherever God's will is acknowledged and obeyed on earth. And the prayer, if it is to be sincerely prayed, must have a reference to him who prays it."² Therefore in praying "Your kingdom come" we are praying that God may rule our lives and we obey his will and that all who dwell on this earth may recognise and accept

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¹ T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus*, London: SCM Press, 1949, p. 169.

² *Ibid.*

God's sovereignty.³ Secondly, if this petition is to be prayed as a part of the prayer taught by Jesus and in continuity with the primitive Christian community then we must attempt an answer to the question: "What did Jesus teach his disciples to pray for when he taught them to pray 'Your kingdom come'?" For this we must consider the use of the expression "kingdom of God" in the recorded words of Jesus and in other New Testament writings.

II The New Testament data on the "Kingdom" idea

The word "kingdom" (or its substitute) occurs 162 times in the New Testament. (Of these the word "kingdom" is used in the secular sense—e.g. a kingdom, kingdom of the world, etc.—20 times. This usage does not concern us in the present study.) It occurs 142 times in such expressions as "kingdom of God," "kingdom of heaven," "the kingdom," "my kingdom," "your kingdom," "kingdom of Christ," etc., where the same idea of the "kingdom of God" is implied even though the precise expression is not used. (The references to God or Christ as "king" have not been included in these figures.) In these various forms there are 7 usages of the word "kingdom" which may be tabulated as on page 83.

If the parallel passages are discounted then we are left with about 60 references to "kingdom of God" (or to the *idea* of the "kingdom of God") in the Synoptic Gospels. Of these about 20 occur in what can be called the "parables of the kingdom." The remaining 40 or so occur in short sayings about the kingdom of God. In other words about one third of the teaching of Jesus about the "kingdom of God" is preserved in the form of parables and about two-thirds of that teaching comes to us through short sayings. These figures do not include the parables which do not use the precise expression "kingdom of God" nor directly refer to that *idea*, such as the parables of the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Wedding Guests (Mk. 2:19f.), Patching a Garment (Mk. 2:21), the Wine-skins (Mk. 2:22). On closer examination, it will be seen that even these and in fact almost all the parables of Jesus have a reference to the theme of the "kingdom of God" and assume its reality either as already present or imminent. That is to say that not only the 20 parables of Jesus reckoned above but almost all the parables of Jesus can be called "The Parables of the Kingdom"⁴ because they directly or indirectly

³ G. Ingle accepting Bishop J. W. C. Wand's definition of the Kingdom of God as "the sphere of God's recognised authority" says that "It consists of those who acknowledge and accept God's claim on them to try to fashion themselves and their lives according to his will. Thus 'thy Kingdom come' is followed by 'thy will be done'" (*The Lord's Creed*, London: Collins, 1964, p. 96.)

⁴ The title of C. H. Dodd's very valuable book, first published by James Nisbet and Co., 1935. Revised edition by James Nisbet 1961 and in Fontana Books, 1961. Norman Perrin in *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*

NEW TESTAMENT DATA ON THE USE OF THE WORD "KINGDOM"

Name of the Book	<i>Basileia tou Theou</i>	<i>Basileia tōn ouranōn</i>	<i>Huioi tēs basileias</i>	<i>Basileia Theou</i>	<i>Basileia tou Christou</i>	<i>hē basileia sou, hē basileia etc.</i>	<i>Basileia in the secular sense</i>
	Kingdom of God	Kingdom of heaven	Sons of the kingdom	Kingdom of God	Kingdom of Christ	The Kingdom, Your kingdom, My kingdom etc.	Kingdom in the secular sense
Mt.	4	33	2	...	...	13	4
Mk.	14	...	...	...	...	1	4
Lk.	32	...	...	...	...	7	7
Synoptics (Totals)	50	33	2	...	...	21	15
John	2	...	...	...	...	3	...
Acts	6	...	...	...	...	2	...
Paulines	5	...	...	4	1	4	...
Other Epistles	...	...	...	...	1	3	1
Revelation	1	...	...	...	1	3	4
Totals	64	33	2	4	3	36	20

Leaving out the 20 occurrences of the word "kingdom" in its secular sense (Column 7) the remaining 142 references to the *idea* of the "kingdom of God" occur in the New Testament as follows:

In the Synoptic Gospels (Mt. = 52; Mk. = 15; Lk. = 39)	...	106
In John	...	5
In Acts	...	8
In the Pauline Epistles	...	14
In other Epistles (Hebrews, James and II Peter only)	...	4
In Revelation	...	5
Total	...	142

carry the central message of Jesus about the "kingdom of God" or illuminate some aspect of that "kingdom."

It is needless to labour the point that "kingdom of God" was in fact the central theme of the message of Jesus and that he created and used parables (as well as similes and metaphors) to communicate his message about the "kingdom of God." We can go a step further and say that Jesus not only used parables (or similes and metaphors) to convey his message about the "kingdom of God" but that in his message the word "kingdom" itself was a parable.⁵ The word "kingdom" is indicative of a reality beyond its literal meaning. The "kingdom" of God in the teaching of Jesus is something like what happens and human beings experience when a human king rules and his subjects live in response to his sovereignty. The word "kingdom" when used in relation to God is a *parable* (or metaphor) of a *relationship* between God and his trustful children (cf. Lk. 18:17—"whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it"). It is a *relationship* which, though perfectly comparable to a father-son relationship, has also another complementary dimension comparable to a king-subject relationship. This metaphor of the king-subject relationship developed in a society which had experienced and valued monarchy for centuries and which from its experience under the rule of its kings had come to realise that God alone could rightly govern human beings and was indeed their sovereign Lord and the ultimate source of all authority and order. The metaphor, therefore, is related to a particular historical and social environment but represents a reality which is beyond its literal meaning and may well be expressed in other terms. Once this *parabolic* character of the word "kingdom" is recognised, it will be possible to see something of the many-sidedness of the meaning of the expression "kingdom of God" from the short sayings and parables of Jesus about the "kingdom" of God" as well as from some of the other sayings and actions of Jesus where there may be no mention of this expression as such.

III The nature of the "Kingdom of God" in the life and teaching of Jesus

Whatever Jesus meant by the expression which has been rendered in the Greek language as *basileia tou Theou* and in English as "kingdom of God" and whatever his hearers were capable of understanding about it, it was such as could only be communicated through pregnant similes, metaphors, short sayings and parables and through the symbol of Jesus' own life. This meaning may be summed up from the sayings of Jesus and the example of his life as follows:

(London: SCM Press, 1976) says: "The parables of Jesus are 'parables of the kingdom', their ultimate referent is the Kingdom of God." (pp. 1, 202)

⁵ N. Perrin calls it "a major biblical symbol" (*ibid.*, pp. 1, 2), "a stenographic symbol" (*ibid.*, pp. 32, 33).

(a) Repentance and faith in the "Kingdom of God"

John the Baptist announced the imminence of the kingdom of God and called the people to repentance (Mt. 3:2; Mk. 1:4). Jesus began his proclamation of the kingdom of God by calling his hearers to repentance and faith (Mt. 4:17; cf. Mk. 1:15; Mt. 6:30-33=Lk. 12:28-31; Mk. 10:15=Lk. 18:17). The kingdom of God is a *condition* (or reality) where human beings are truly repentant (of their sins) and believing, i.e., open to God in child-like trust. For human beings it is a condition of their trustful response to God carrying in itself their whole being and every aspect of their life. Where this condition prevails and lives are lived from such an orientation there we have a glimpse of the kingdom of God.

(b) The preaching, receiving, entering and the "is-ness" of the kingdom of God

In the sayings of Jesus the term "kingdom of God" is never defined but indicators to its meaning are given and often some aspect of its meaning is illustrated. The reality of the kingdom of God is always assumed. It *is* (Mt. 19:14 "... of such is [Gk. *estin*] the kingdom of heaven." Lk. 17:21 "... the kingdom of God *is* in the midst of you.") The kingdom of God *is*. It can be and is to be *preached* about (Mt. 4:17, 23; 24:14; Mk. 1:14-15; Lk. 4:43; 9:2; 10:9). People, especially the followers of Jesus, must *pray for its coming* (Mt. 6:10=Lk. 11:2), and *seek it* as a matter of top priority (Mt. 6:33=Lk. 12:31). People can *accept or receive* the kingdom of God through child-like faith (Mk. 10:15 = Lk. 18:17); they can *see it* and *enter into it*, i.e. participate in its responsibilities and blessings (Mt. 7:21; Lk. 9:27; cf. Jn. 3:3, 5). The powerful, uncontrollable present reality of the kingdom of God is well expressed in Mt. 11:12. "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven *has been coming violently*" (RSV mg.).⁶ Here the kingdom of God is not something that has just come into being for the first time. It is a reality which has always been there but is now "coming violently" or is "forcing

⁶ This is a difficult text to interpret. Its meaning depends on how the three Greek words *biazetai* (=suffers violence), *biazetai* (=men of violence) and *harpaxousin* (=are grabbing) are translated. We have, in agreement with the RSV margin, treated *biazetai* as the Present, Indicative, Middle (not Passive) of the verb *biazō*. The parallel passage in Lk. 16:16 (which is secondary) recognises the difficulty of this saying of Jesus and waters it down by rendering it: "Since then the Kingdom of God is preached, and every one enters it violently." T. W. Manson, after considering the various possible meanings of the three important Greek words mentioned above, concludes: "The most satisfactory interpretation of the saying is that given by Otto (*Reich Gottes und Menschensohn*, pp. 84-88). It involves rendering the saying as follows: 'The Law and the prophets were until John: From that time the Kingdom of God exercises its power and men of violence snatch at it'" (*The Sayings of Jesus*, London: SCM Press, 1949, p. 134).

its way into" the lives and experience of people because of the person; the ministry and the message of Jesus. This is the difference between the past expectations and affirmations of the kingdom of God up to the time of John the Baptist and its proclamation and realisation since then. The kingdom of God is now making headway. Its reality is no more a matter of the future, of an eschatological hope; it is evidently present in the kind of life that Jesus is living.

It should be noted that terms like "preaching", "seeking", "seeing", "accepting", "receiving", "entering", "forcing" etc., are experiential descriptions of the kingdom of God. Jesus chose to speak about the kingdom of God in such experiential terms because the "kingdom of God" has to do with a *relationship* between God and man and it could best be realised and understood in terms of experience and relationships rather than in words and law of the Mosaic kind.

We must also note that in all the sayings of Jesus about the kingdom of God there is hardly any that would suggest that we human beings can in any way bring about, or bring in, or further or extend that kingdom. It always is and remains *God's* kingdom. It is always there as a gift from God (cf. Lk. 12:32 "... it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom!") which human beings can only *seek, pray for, see, proclaim, receive, accept, enter into* (or participate in), *rejoice about and celebrate*. This fact about the kingdom of God reflected in the New Testament in general and in the teaching of Jesus in particular may curb the enthusiasm and activism of those who would like to see the kingdom of God extended on earth through participation in peoples' struggles for liberation, social justice and better living conditions. But it can also help us to recognise other dimensions of what the ancient biblical expression "kingdom of God" was intended to convey when used by Jesus and the early Christian community of the New Testament period.

(c) The attractiveness of the kingdom of God

The attractiveness of the kingdom of God is expressed by the use of such terms for it as "wedding feast", "wedding guests", "harvest", "a treasure", and "new wine", and the life of its members is characterised by such qualities as mercy, love, generosity, forgiveness, watchfulness, expectation, joyful celebration, fellowship and a child-like trust in God as their heavenly Father, *Abba* (also cf. Mt. 13:16-17; Lk. 10:23-24). Where such conditions prevail, there the kingdom of God is to be discerned.

(d) The kingdom of God and power

A dominant characteristic of the kingdom of God evident in the life, works and words of Jesus as well as within the community of his followers is *power*. There was astonishing *power* in his way of speaking ("What is this? A new teaching! What authority he commands ..." [Mk. 1:27] ; "... he taught them as one who had authority"?

[Mk. 1:22]). There was *power* in his ministry of healing and exorcisms; *power* in defying dehumanising conventions and legalistic traditions and in setting up new values and in living a life of a new quality (cf. 1 Cor. 4:20). That liberating *power* manifest in and through the ministry of Jesus is a characteristic feature of the kingdom of God is also evident from the record of what is called the "Baalzebul Controversy" (Mt. 12:24-27=Mk. 3:22-26=Lk. 11:15-19; note especially Mt. 12:28=Lk. 11:20) as well as from the parable of the Strong Man which follows it (Mt. 12:29-30=Mk. 3:23-27=Lk. 11:21-23). So real was this *power* of the kingdom of God that Jesus could speak of the kingdom as "forcing its way violently" or as "coming violently" (Mt. 11:12 RSV mg. See footnote 6 on p.85 above). Jesus could claim before his audiences: "... there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with *power*" (Mk. 9:1).²

(e) The time of the kingdom of God

As Jesus taught his disciples to pray "Your kingdom come" it is legitimate to ask when he and his disciples expected the kingdom of God to come. The debate among those who interpret Jesus as teaching that the kingdom of God was a present reality (i.e. already "realized"), those who argue that for Jesus the kingdom was still in the future and those who say that Jesus spoke of the kingdom as both present and future is too well-known and also too lengthy to be indulged in here. In this debate interpreters have often taken rigid positions and yet the debate is instructive. In spite of disagreements among interpreters one thing becomes clear. That is, for Jesus and those who believed his message and took it seriously the kingdom of God was a many-sided reality and they spoke of it in different ways.

Four texts from the Gospels may be noted in particular which indicate the "time" of the coming of the kingdom of God: (1) "The kingdom of God is at hand" (Mt. 10:7; Mk. 1:15. Gk: *eggiken*=is at hand. The kingdom is present, or imminent). (2) "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mt. 12:28=Lk. 11:20. Gk. *ephthasen*=has come, arrived. The kingdom is present). (3) "...for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Lk. 17:21. Gk: *estin*=is. The kingdom is present). (4) "Thy kingdom come" (Mt. 6:10; Lk. 11:2. Gk: *elthetō*. The kingdom is yet to come, though it may well be present).

The kingdom of God is generally proclaimed by Jesus as a *present* reality. His own life, his words and works attest this fact. This is also the implication of most of his parables when considered in their original setting in the life of Jesus. Yet there are certain texts, e.g.,

² See also C. H. Dodd's treatment of Mk 9:1 in his *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Fontana Paperback, 1961), pp. 43-44.

"Thy kingdom come", which imply that, though the kingdom of God is proleptically experienced in the present (in the person and ministry of Jesus) its full realisation still lies in the future. While the tension between the present and the future aspects of the kingdom in the sayings of Jesus must be recognised it is possible to understand the futuristic element as representing not the *time* of the manifestation of the kingdom but a dimension of its fulfilment or consummation. The blessedness of the kingdom of God "may be enjoyed here and now, but is never exhausted in any experience that falls within the bounds of time and space. Our destiny lies in the eternal order. . ."⁸ Thus the kingdom of God is realised as a present reality in the Christ-event, though "at some date in the future the present earthly manifestation of the kingdom of God will yield to a purely transcendent order in which it will be absolute."⁹

(f) The location of the kingdom of God

The precise location of the kingdom of God is not defined in the sayings of Jesus. Perhaps it could not be defined because it was primarily a description of a *relationship* between God and man and it could be realised in diverse spheres. In particular, four spheres are suggested by the sayings of Jesus in which the kingdom of God is seen to be present and operative: (1) ". . . in the *midst* of you" (Lk. 17:21. Gk: *entos hun on estin*), i.e., in the community of believers. (2) *entos hun on* can mean "in the *midst* of you" in the person of Christ, in his life and ministry. (3) *entos hun on* can mean "in the *midst* of you" in the sense of "*within* you," i.e., in the heart of each individual believer (or corporately in the hearts of the believers) as a *spiritual reality*. (4) *entos hun on* may be understood in its broadest sense as in the *world*. The kingdom is present in the *midst of the world* as a "heaven", a "light", a "seed" and as "salt" in the person of Christ as well as embodied in the community of believers.

Whatever Jesus may have meant to convey by the sayings which suggest the presence of the kingdom of God either in his own person and ministry or in the community of believers, it is clear from decreasing use of the expression "kingdom of God" in other New Testament writings than the Synoptic Gospels (see the data given above on p. 83) that in the course of time the primitive Christian community and also later Christians (with the exception of the Roman Church) tended to identify the kingdom of God more and more with *Christ* rather than with the community of believers, the Church. It is to this understanding of the kingdom of God by the Church (both in the New Testament period and later) that we now turn in the next, and concluding, section.

⁸ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 156.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44f.

IV Christ as the embodiment of the kingdom of God

One legitimate inference from the use of the word *entos* (=in the midst, or within) in Lk. 17:21 is that Jesus was pointing to himself as the embodiment of the "kingdom of God" in the midst of the people and most probably intended his references to the present reality of the kingdom of God to be understood in this sense. This becomes all the more probable and convincing when we consider the early Christian community's understanding and use of the idea and expression "kingdom of God" reflected in the New Testament writings.

A glance at the data tabulated on page 83 will show that the expression "kingdom of God" (or its equivalent) occurs 106 times in the Synoptic Gospels. It occurs only 14 times in the Pauline Epistles (spread over 6 out of 13 Epistles) and only 22 times in the rest of the New Testament spread over 6 books. It is entirely missing in 12 out of the 24 books of the New Testament outside the Synoptic Gospels. It is also significant that the 36 references outside the Gospels mainly contemplate either a "spiritual" kingdom or simply a "kingdom of God" at the end of time in the "other world" (= eschatological kingdom). At least 20 out of these 36 references imply a "spiritual" or eschatological kingdom, but in fact about 32 out of the 36 references can be interpreted eschatologically. In the Pauline Epistles, 10 out of the 14 references to the kingdom of God imply an "other worldly" kingdom, and in fact 12 out of these 14 references can be interpreted in this sense. These figures show that references to the kingdom of God not only thin out in the preaching (*kerugma*) and teaching (*didachē*) vocabulary of the Church of the New Testament time but also that in the relatively fewer references that there are the early Christian community tended to use the kingdom of God terminology for a reality in the "other" world beyond time and space. And while the early Christians continued to pray "Your kingdom come," they did not much preach about the kingdom. They preached Christ (1 Cor. 1:23 "but we preach Christ: . .") and their more fervent prayer was "Maranatha" (1 Cor. 16:22 "Our Lord, come!"). The Pauline Epistles which contain 14 references to the kingdom of God call the attention of the readers not to the kingdom of God as such but to Christ, the exalted, sovereign Lord of the Church and of the whole cosmos. The believer is called upon to enter, not the "kingdom of God," but into "union with Christ" (=to be "in Christ", *en Christō*). The same thing happens in the Johannine writings. Christ replaces the kingdom in the faith and preaching of the primitive Christian community. Or it may be more true to say that the deeper significance and fulfilment of Jesus' preaching and statements about the kingdom of God are now realised in terms of the presence of Christ himself. Christ himself becomes the "kingdom of God" and the kingdom of God terminology gradually goes out of currency (except in liturgy) like some of the inadequate christological titles of Jesus:

Indicators to such an understanding of the "kingdom of God," i.e., of its identification with Christ, were already there in the short

sayings, parables and actions of Jesus. This can be inferred from Mt. 12:28=Lk. 11:20, "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you," and from the parable of the Strong Man (Mt. 12:29-30=Mk. 3:23-27=Lk. 11:21-23).¹⁰ "Read the Gospels carefully," says A. M. Hunter, "and you cannot escape the conclusion that where Jesus is, there is the kingdom."¹¹ Origen was right when he used the term *autobasileia*¹²: Christ himself is what he called the "kingdom of God." K. L. Schmidt regards "*autobasileia* of Christ" as the "plain and unequivocal witness" of the New Testament.¹³ One can, therefore, preach the kingdom of God without actually using that expression, if one is preaching Christ. To proclaim the kingdom of God is to proclaim Christ as the locus of God's delivering, saving, transforming activity. To invite people to "enter" into the kingdom of God is to invite them to God "in union with Christ"; it is to invite people to enter into that relationship between God and man which we see demonstrated and lived out in the person and life of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ "Thus, to become a disciple of Jesus is equivalent to being in the Kingdom."¹⁵ When

¹⁰ See also Mt. 21:9=Mk. 11:10=Lk. 19:39; Mt. 19:24=Mk. 10:29=Lk. 18:29. With reference to these, Karl L. Schmidt says: "Certain passages presuppose the actual identity of the kingdom with Jesus... The name and message of Jesus Christ, or Jesus Christ Himself, are thus equated with the Kingdom of God" (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel tr. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Vol. I, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964, pp. 588-589.)

¹¹ *Interpreting the Parables*, London: SCM Press, 1960, p. 64.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 590.

¹⁴ "The progress of the Kingdom consists in the uprising within the hearts of men of a love and trust which answer to the Love which shines from the Cross..." William Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, London: Macmillan, 1955, p. xxxi.

¹⁵ A. M. Hunter, *The Work and Words of Jesus*, Madras: CLS, 1969 (Indian ed.), p. 86. Hunter, referring to Jesus' exorcisms, says: "Where He is, there is the Rule of God. Clearly the Kingdom is bound up with the person of Jesus, the message with the messenger." *Ibid.* He approvingly cites from K. L. Schmidt the statement of Marcion: "In the Gospel the Kingdom of God is Christ himself." *Ibid.* At the end of the chapter Hunter adds a brief note stating the position of the use of the "kingdom of God" language in the Synoptic Gospels, Pauline Epistles and in Acts and then asks the question: "Why has 'the Kingdom' fallen out and been replaced by 'Christ'?" His own answer is: "The Kingdom is Christ, or, as P. T. Forsyth put it in a memorable passage: 'The Gospel of Christ replaced the Gospel of the Kingdom because by his death He became the Kingdom, because He became all that the Kingdom contained... The Testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of the Kingdom. The Kingdom was great with Him. The Gospel of the Kingdom was Christ in essence; Christ was the Gospel of the Kingdom in power. The

we pray "Your kingdom come," we are praying for that condition in which human beings are truly united to God; we are praying for the "christification" of man and society. Such an understanding of the New Testament expression "kingdom of God" is particularly relevant in today's India where the use of king-kingdom terminology in Christian proclamation recalls the past experience under western imperialism and domination of the country and where "conversion" (in the sense of proselytization) to Christianity without much evidence of real, inner transformation into the likeness of Christ has been bitterly resented and where religion is valued as a force which can transform man into the perfect being he is ultimately destined to be. In India, Christ and "christification" will always be welcome, but "king" and "kingdomization" in religion will be resisted and deplored.

Kingdom was Christ in a mystery; Christ was the publication, the establishment of the Kingdom... He was the truth of His own greatest Gospel. It is where He is...'' *ibid.*, p. 87. *