



A More Glorious Gospel

A look at “flat Bible” theology

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In the nearly eight years since we moved here, we have had several visitors who believe and teach something called “flat Bible” theology. “Flat Bible” thought is easy enough to recognize, but it has many variations. Recently a family from Missouri visited here, and as the conversation unfolded I noticed the familiar pattern again. And so I asked him, “Have you ever read Thomas Lancaster’s book called *Restoration*?”

He admitted that he had, though he forcefully denied any relationship between his and Lancaster’s theology. And yet, as the conversation continued, I heard a lot of the same things being said that sounded so much like Lancaster and his publisher, “First Fruits of Zion.”

I can’t be sure, but it seems to me that this way of viewing the Bible is growing, and it has many sincere adherents who do not realize that it is assuredly not kingdom Christianity.

For those who have not yet run into “flat Bible” theology, it is, very briefly, the belief that the Old and New Testaments run along the same moral plane and that Jesus never intended to be teaching a higher standard of morals or behavior than what the Old Testament *really* teaches. This requires some hair splitting about what is moral and what is not. Because of this, some reject the idea of dividing the Old Testament into moral, civil, and ceremonial categories, and decide to simply accept everything as having some application today—especially the Sabbath and dietary laws. These people, of whom Thomas Lancaster

is a primary voice, expect God to once again establish the entire Old Covenant in these last days, as people gather around a restored Torah.

My friend from Missouri did not agree with this, but he agreed with the teaching that the Sermon on the Mount has been misunderstood by the Anabaptists. He said that Jesus never intended to say anything different than what God taught Moses. “It has been said ... but I say unto you” was simply Jesus clarifying certain aspects of the Law which the Pharisees had obscured.

The slippery slope

This is where it gets slippery, so watch out! If it is true that Jesus was simply trying to correct the understanding of the Torah, then we must try to understand Jesus’ words in light of the Old Testament. This is foundational. Jesus, they say, could never have contradicted or changed the Law of God, since He came not to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it. Therefore, the gospel of Jesus does not differ from the Law, at least in any moral sense. For some, it does not differ at all in any sense.

Of course, the apostles continued to keep the Law even after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This seems evident from passages like Acts 25:8, where Paul tells Festus, “Neither against the law of the Jews, neither against the temple, nor yet against Caesar, have I offended any thing at all.” Christians of Jewish descent continued keeping the Law for some time, although the events of 70 A.D. closed that door completely, most assuredly by the hand of God. Gentile Christians were, of course, another matter.

Reading the Bible in the light of “flat Bible” theology leads to some gradually diverging practices, mostly in three areas. First, and most important, is the doctrine of nonresistance. The concept of two kingdoms and not resisting evil is certainly a moral issue, and those of the “flat Bible” persuasion eventually, and sometimes even reluctantly, must accept the use of the sword, both individually and as a society. They accept self-defense and “just” wars, because they must reconcile the words of Jesus with those of Moses.

A second issue is that of divorce and remarriage, which is why some people turn to “flat Bible” theology in the first place. If Moses thought it necessary, because of the hardness of people’s hearts, to allow divorce, then Jesus must be saying the same thing. His comments about how it was in the beginning are only meant, so they say, to correct certain abuses.

A third divergence arises in the area of money and possessions. While the Old Testament provides for tithing and supporting widows and orphans, the overriding

theme is that obedience to godliness results in God's favor; "Wealth and riches shall be in his house." Ps. 112:3

Jesus takes almost the opposite stance. "Blessed are the poor." "Sell what you have and give alms." "Do not lay up treasures on earth."

How can we reconcile all this? Is it possible that we have misread Jesus, and that the Law actually contains the key to unlocking what Jesus really meant? Did nothing change significantly between the two Testaments?

The early church

Anyone familiar with the history of the early church will recognize that "flat Bible theology" is not historic Christianity. The early Christians denied, vehemently denied, that the God of the Old Testament was someone different than the God of the New. And yet, they also clearly felt that a new, higher dispensation had arrived which made the Old obsolete. One quote from Irenaeus will suffice:

Since, then, the law originated with Moses, it terminated with John as a necessary consequence. Christ had come to fulfil it: wherefore "the law and the prophets were" with them "until John." And therefore Jerusalem, taking its commencement from David, and fulfilling its own times, must have an end of legislation when the new covenant was revealed.
ANF 1, 466

Indeed, a recurring theme among the early Christian writers is that a tremendous new breakthrough in morality had occurred by virtue of the life and teachings of Jesus. A quantum leap, if you will, and a paradigm shift for the whole of mankind.

No wonder. The apostle Paul sees it that way as well:

But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious ... which glory was to be done away: How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious? ... For if that which is done away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is glorious. 2 Co. 3:7-11 (in part)

Truly, this gospel that Jesus brought far exceeds in glory what it replaced. The first Covenant was only a necessary prelude, a shadow, of the new kingdom that Jesus brought. This kingdom we have received is often called the upside-down kingdom, in contrast to the right-side-up kingdom of the nation of Israel. This is the kingdom we have received, a kingdom that does not resist evil, does not sanction divorce or remarriage, and teaches against the accumulation of wealth.

A more glorious gospel than the Old one! ~