

God Sent His Son

by Richie Temple
Cary, North Carolina

At this time of the year we often hear the joyous Christian message as set forth by Paul in Galatians:

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons (Gal. 4:4-5).

How beautiful these words are, and yet, rather than understanding the message that "God sent his Son" in the light of post-biblical creeds it is important to remember its *original biblical meaning*. This meaning was set forth by Peter in the first Christian "sermon" on the day of Pentecost:

*"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a **man** accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This **man** was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. David said about him:*

'I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.'

Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the Patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. God has

raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven and yet he said,

The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."

*Therefore, let all Israel be assured of this: God has **made** this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:22-36).*

Several things are immediately obvious in this message which Peter proclaimed. First, the message and the language were simple and direct. Second, the message was rooted and grounded in Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah. Third, these prophecies were said to be fulfilled in what "Jesus of Nazareth, a **man** accredited by **God**" had accomplished. Fourth, this fulfillment had taken place according to "the set purpose and foreknowledge of God." Fifth, the great culminating truth to be understood and believed was that "God has *made* this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

Luke had no trouble presenting this message in the simple language of every day use and without the complications of post biblical traditions. He presents a human Jesus, born by the power of the holy spirit, and who *for that reason* was "called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). For Luke, Jesus is the anointed Messiah - the fulfillment of OT prophecies and promises - not, "God, the Son." In the plainest of language he states:

How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him (Acts 10:38).

The distinction between God and Jesus in the above verses could not be more clearly stated. Nor could Jesus' mission as the Messiah of God.

The original Christian message as stated by Peter on Pentecost and as confirmed by him in his first epistle is that Jesus was "**foreknown** before the foundation of the world, but was manifested in these

last days for you" (I Peter 1:20 KJV). As the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, Jesus was "a lamb without spot and blemish" (I Pet. 1:18-19) sent by God for the redemption of the world.

But does not the "sending/coming" language of the NT imply that Jesus was "pre-existent" in some form in heaven before God "sent him into the world?" Possibly, and most Christians have assumed that this was "obviously" the case for most of the last two thousand years of Christian history. However, the abridged version of the highly respected *Theological Dictionary of the NT* (p. 68) emphasizes that the popular idea that the word "send" in Gal. 4:4 "denotes a prior existence with the sender finds no support ... the term finds its christological flavor only from the context, and the emphasis is on God the sender."

What we must always ask is, "what did the original biblical writers mean by this language?" Does the fact that John the Baptist was "a man sent from God" (John 1:6) mean that he also pre-existed with God in heaven before his "coming into the world?" And if other human beings are spoken of as being "born into the world" (John 16:21), "coming into the world" (John 1:9 KJV), or being "sent into the world" (John 17:18) should we conclude that all humans pre-existed? Surely, the biblical answer is "no"! Instead, as most scholars recognize today, biblical "sending" language is based on the Old Testament language of the commissioning of God's prophets. This can be seen with Moses, Aaron,

Jeremiah and other OT prophets who were all "sent by God" (Ps. 105:26; Jer. 1:7; 7:21-26; etc.).

The biblical way of thinking and speaking is perfectly reflected in James 1:17:

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights ...

This does not mean that every gift from God literally pre-existed with God in heaven before he gave it. It is simply an emphatic way of saying that all good things come from God. Though all things can be said to pre-exist in God's foreknowledge, only the context of a verse can determine whether that which "comes down from above" or that which is "sent by God" literally existed with him in heaven before he sent it.

Simply put, the original biblical message that "God sent his Son" had nothing whatsoever to do with speculations about "pre-existence" nor about a mysterious God who "exists in three persons." Instead, the original biblical message had to do solely with the *purpose* for which God sent his Son - i.e. to bring salvation to the world (cp. John 3:16-17). Let us hear this in Jesus' own words:

Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent (John 17:1-3).