



STATEMENT DN-078-2

EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM

Discussing the Bible with New Agers (Part Two)

by **Elliot Miller**

New Agers present Christians with a challenging evangelistic opportunity. On the one hand, they have already accepted that they have a spiritual void in their lives and are actively attempting to fill it. Thus they are seemingly "half way home" to the kingdom of God. On the other hand, they have bought into a set of ideas that strongly prejudice their reading of the Bible.

In Part One I suggested a basic strategy for holding New Agers accountable when they begin to deal dishonestly with Scripture. Now I will demonstrate the following three-step approach to dealing with specific ways New

Agers mishandle biblical texts: (1) Point out how the immediate context of the passage supports a different interpretation than the one they have offered. (2) Overwhelm them with examples from the larger context of the Bible that contradict their view. (3) Demonstrate that the source they quoted from the Bible to support their position actually adhered faithfully to that larger tradition that contradicts their view.

Although any number of doctrines that New Agers try to find in the Bible could be used to demonstrate this approach, space limitations dictate that I deal with only one here. I have chosen the foundational New Age belief in the divinity of all things.

Acts 17:28. To support their doctrine that humans and the world partake of the very being of God (*pantheism*: "God is all"; or, for some, *panentheism*: "God is in all"), New Agers sometimes cite the words of the apostle Paul in Acts 17:28, that "in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said..." (NASV). Is the apostle Paul here endorsing the pantheistic philosophy of the Stoic "poets" Aratus and Cleanthes, from whom he quotes? This is not a warranted conclusion.

Of course, Paul is seeking to find some common ground with his Greek audience on which to build his evangelistic appeal. So he cites a statement with which — at least to a certain extent — a Christian can agree. For the affirmation Paul quotes is, of itself, perfectly consistent with the biblical doctrine that God is omnipresent. In other words, since there is no place where God does not exist, He could be accurately thought of as completely encompassing His creation (nothing occurs anywhere in the universe that is not within the limitless range of His presence and being). This is all Paul means; his words do not affirm that the Creator and His creation share the same identity or essence. We can see this by looking at the overall body of Paul's address.

It is evident that Paul disagrees at many points with pantheism in general and the Stoics in particular. He begins in verse 24 affirming that "God...made the world and all things in it." Clearly Paul believes in an ontological distinction between God and the world, with the world being dependent on God for its existence. Paul proceeds in verses 24-25 to affirm that God is in need of nothing within the creation to sustain *His* existence. This affirmation simply could not have been made in Stoic philosophy; nor can it be consistently made in New Age philosophy today. If the world is of one essence with God, then by definition God is not independent or free of the world.

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Paul concludes by affirming in verses 30-31 that God now declares to all men that they should repent of idolatry because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness, through Jesus — whom He raised from the dead. Here we find that God is involved in a *sovereign* and *personal* manner with the world as its lawgiver and judge, and that He has intervened in human history *miraculously* to establish both salvation from, and judgment upon, human sin. None of these activities of God could be true within a pantheistic system, but all are perfectly consistent with the infinite, personal, holy God of Judeo-Christian theism.

Luke 17:20-21. Even more popular with New Agers are the words Jesus uttered in Luke 17:20-21. After being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied: "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you" (NIV). It seems that the entirety of New Age philosophy is often read into these words, and New Agers come away from this passage convinced that Jesus is one of them.

A serious consideration of the context of Luke 17, however, reveals that pantheism was the furthest thing from Jesus' mind. We must first notice what Jesus did *not* say: He did not affirm that the very being or nature of God is "within you." He specifically was speaking about the *kingdom* of God, a concept with a well-defined meaning in biblical usage. The kingdom of God is the rule of God and Christ and the place where they rule (e.g., Rev. 11:15; 12:10). The citizens of the kingdom are those who do the will of God and Christ (Luke 11:2; Matt. 7:21).

The Pharisees wanted to know when the kingdom of God that Jesus often spoke of would appear. Although Jesus did teach that the kingdom would come at a future time in glory, He also taught that the kingdom comes in stages, and in its earliest phase was already present (*see*, e.g., Matt. 13:31-32). It was present in the sense that the reign of the King had already taken a foothold on earth as Jesus' disciples obeyed His commands.

This accords with the fact that the Greek word *entos* ("within you") can also be translated "in your midst" (*see*, e.g., the New American Standard Version). And so, Jesus' point was, "You are looking for the kingdom to come only in a cataclysmic fashion ["with observation"], and thus you fail to notice that the King and His subjects are already in your presence."

With the proper understanding of what "kingdom of God" means, it is clear that Jesus would never have told the Pharisees that His kingdom presently existed inside their souls. For they were determined *not* to accept the messianic kingship of Jesus.

The Larger Biblical Context. It is not only the immediate context of the above passages that rules out the New Agers' interpretations, but, even more so, the overall context of biblical tradition. *All* of Scripture presupposes a subject-object relationship between God and His creation.

For example, humanity's separation from God is never attributed to a *subjective* blindness to our true union with the divine, as in a pantheistic system of thought. Rather, it is sin or transgression of God's holy law that has *objectively* and truly separated us from Him (Isa. 59:1-2).

In the first chapter of the Bible we find that the world was created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) by a divine decree (cf. Ps. 33:6, 9; Heb. 11:3; Rom. 4:17). That it was *ex nihilo* is supported by the fact that the Hebrew word (*bara*) used for the initial creation of the universe and man is never used in Scripture (unlike other Hebrew words for "create") with reference to preexisting material, out of which the created object would be fashioned. Thus God did not fashion the world out of Himself. At the core of man's being he is a *creature* — there is no divine spark that can be fanned through meditation or other New Age practices.

The infinite gap between creator and creation revealed in Genesis 1 is maintained consistently throughout Scripture (e.g., Ps. 102:25-27; 113:4-6; 1 Kings 8:27). In fact, the identification of the creation with God is denounced as the very essence of idolatry (Rom. 1:18-25). The pride of man is condemned for the very reason that he *is* a mere creature, and only the Creator — who bestows on man whatever glory he possesses — is worthy of exaltation (Isa. 2:11, 17, 22; cf. Ps. 100:3). Furthermore, humans who make a profession of deity receive a special condemnation from Yahweh (Isa. 47:8-11; Ezek. 28:2, 6-9).

Now, it is within the setting of this overarching theism that Jesus and Paul conducted their ministries. While they made a few statements that might sound pantheistic to pantheists, the pantheist needs to understand that they were faithful representatives of the Jewish theism out of which they sprang. Thus, since their words can also be interpreted in theistic senses, the theistic interpretations should prevail.

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Jesus: Hebrew or Hindu? When pressed, many New Agers would grant that Paul was probably not a pantheist. But they cannot afford to make the same concession regarding Jesus. Generally speaking, even they are compelled to acknowledge the superior spiritual status of Jesus in human history. If He contradicted their beliefs this would seriously challenge their own faith in New Age mysticism. Thus New Age teachers have gone to great lengths to remold Jesus in the image of an Eastern mystical master.

First, they tell us, Jesus Himself was a mere human like all of us. But, like all of us, He possessed within a divine or "Christ" principle. At the time of His baptism He finally manifested this Christ self, achieved "Christ consciousness" (divine self-awareness), and thereby became a "Christ." Therefore, they conclude, His unparalleled life is a proof for *New Age* (not "fundamentalist Christian") doctrine, since it shows forth the possibilities of human potential. By following Jesus' example, they assure us, we too can become "Christ's."

Second, according to much of New Age literature (e.g., Levi's *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*), Jesus obtained His wisdom and powers not so much from His Jewish background as from His alleged (though biblically unsupported) wide travels through Asia and the Mediterranean world. In such remote places as the Himalayas he was supposedly trained in the "mysteries" of occult knowledge.

New Agers often add that Jesus disavowed distinctive doctrines from His Jewish heritage, such as blood atonement and the wrath of God against sin that necessitates such atonement. Some even go so far as to say that Jesus disavowed Yahweh (the "vengeful Jewish tribal deity") altogether in favor of His heavenly Father, whom He revealed as a new god to the Jewish people.

In response the Christian must show that the New Testament — the only extant record of Jesus' life and teaching drawn from eyewitness testimony (as opposed to accounts based on the visions of nineteenth and twentieth century occultists!) — lends absolutely no support to the New Age view. Jesus told the woman at the well, "You worship that which you do not know; we worship that which we know, for *salvation is from the Jews*" (John 4:22; emphasis added). In His Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:17-18), Jesus endorsed the entire Old Testament law, stating that He came for the very purpose of fulfilling it (including blood atonement — cf. Matt. 26:27-28). To the Pharisees, the most "fundamentalist" sect of Judaism, He proclaimed that the Old Testament God they claimed to worship and His heavenly Father are one and the same (John 8:54). In fact, Jesus claimed to *be* the Old Testament Yahweh incarnate (John 8:58; cf. Exod. 3:14-15).

Christians must warn New Agers that by abstracting the term Christ (Hebrew: *mashiyach* or *Messiah*, meaning "anointed one") from its historical Hebrew usage they have created a counterfeit "Jesus" in opposition to the living Lord (show them 1 Cor. 11:3-4). In its proper usage, "Christ" is not a cosmic principle, but the title of one specific person, the promised deliverer-king of Israel.

In Daniel 9:25-26 this individual's coming was prophesied down to the very year, and His sacrificial death for our sins was foretold. And in stunning fulfillment of that prophecy Jesus was born, whom the angels called Christ *at the time of His birth* (Luke 2:11). It was the Holy Spirit who came upon Him at His baptism — not some mythic Christ consciousness. Thus the term Christ is never used in the New Testament with reference to anyone or anything but Jesus. In fact, the apostle John identified the ancient Gnostic (and today's New Age) teaching that Jesus and Christ are two separate entities as the *doctrine of the antichrist* (1 John 2:22).

A Final Challenge to New Agers. After convincingly setting the biblical record straight, Christians can grant to New Agers that perhaps they have abused the Bible in ignorance. But from now on they know better than to use the teachings of the Bible and the name of Jesus to support New Age beliefs. If they wish to honestly continue down the New Age path they must first conclude that Jesus was simply deluded about God and His own mission. If they are not prepared to draw such a conclusion, they need to seriously wrestle with His person and claims on their lives.

As one who has surrendered to His claims, you can tell them there is nothing to dread. Rather, you have discovered that He alone is capable of filling that gnawing spiritual void within (John 6:35; 7:37; 8:31-32).