



LIFE AFTER DEATH SHOULD WE BELIEVE THE TESTIMONIES?

By Albert James Dager

EVER SINCE DEATH entered upon the human scene man has questioned what lies beyond its veil. In recent years books have been written and motion pictures have been produced which attempt to explain what happens to a person after he has died. Thousands of testimonies of those who have been pronounced clinically dead, yet returned to consciousness, have been recorded in books and on audio and video media. Some claim to have been to Heaven or to Hell and back, with varying descriptions of what they say they encountered.

The best-known researcher on the subject of life after death has been the late Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, M.D., author of *On Death & Dying* (New York: Scribner, 1969), *Questions and Answers on Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1974), and numerous other books related to the subject. Her pioneer work in this field of research inspired others—both Christians and non-Christians—to offer what they believe is incontrovertible proof that death is not the end of one's existence.

Among the best-selling authors in this field is Raymond A. Moody, Jr., M.D., who wrote two books, *Life After Life* and *Reflections On Life After Life*, both of which were published by Bantam Books in 1975 and 1976 respectively.

Dr. Kübler-Ross chose to exclude the issue of religion, feeling unqualified to address the matter. She felt there were others more qualified, specifically clergy, who could deal with the subject better.

Dr. Moody, on the other hand, recognized that one's religion could not be ignored when it comes to death and

dying. Yet he was careful not to take a stance for or against any particular religious position.

Following close on the heels of Kübler-Ross and Moody, Dr. Ralph Wilkerson, former pastor of the now defunct Melodyland Christian Center in Anaheim, California, wrote *Beyond and Back* in 1977. Dr. Wilkerson's book, published by

Melodyland Productions, addressed the testimonies of Christians who claimed to have had experiences akin to those recorded in Moody's and Kübler-Ross's books.

Wilkerson relates experiences told him by members of Melodyland Christian Center's congregation, several of whom he ministered to at the time of their experiences. Other books have followed which purport to relate testimonies of people who have died and gone to Heaven or Hell. Others, such as Howard Storm's *My Descent Into Death*, Don Piper's *90 Minutes in Heaven*, and Steve Sjogren's *The Day I Died*, claim to be first-person accounts of experiences after dying.

These books have had far reaching effects, and the years have seen no diminish in interest. Two major motion pictures, *Brainstorm* and

Flatliners, borrowed from the theme, although both gave the impression that man will live through his memories, not in any eternal bliss or condemnation.

Recently, the alleged experiences of a young boy, Colton Burpo, was the subject of a book titled *Heaven is for Real*. The book formed the basis for a motion picture of the same name popular among Christians. *Heaven is for Real* is an account of Colton Burpo's alleged visitation to Heaven as he lay on the operating table undergoing emergency surgery to repair internal



ELISABETH KÜBLER-ROSS

organs severely poisoned by a burst appendix. (See our special report, *Heaven is for Real*, available upon request.)

I caution the reader not to accept at face value any of the testimonies related in these studies. In fact, before reading anything on this subject, one must be sure where he stands in relation to God and to His Word. It is God's Word as recorded in the Bible that must be the final arbiter of what we believe. Testimonies may have their value, but they cannot replace Scripture.

SIMILARITIES

Remarkable similarities in reports from persons of varied religious and philosophical persuasions emerge in these studies. While these and subsequent writings on the subject of near-death experiences seem to answer the question "is there life after death?" They also raise many more questions.

Such works are a mixed blessing. On one hand they appear to offer a quasi-scientific affirmation of the scriptural truth that there is more to life than one's earthly existence. On the other hand, some offer what appear to be contradictions to faith in Jesus Christ as the only way to God.

The descriptions of those who have died, both with and without faith in Christ, seem to be identical. This has caused confusion on the part of those who cannot reconcile this phenomenon with the Word of God. Scripture is emphatic about the wrath of God abiding upon the wicked, and His blessing of eternal life abiding upon those who are righteous in Christ.

If the Scriptures are true, how can it be that unbelievers and those who hold to religious faiths distinct from faith in Christ Jesus have had similar experiences?

How can we reconcile the apparent contradictions of Scripture by the testimonies of people whose lives have been profoundly changed for the better by their death or near-death experiences even though they lacked and continue to lack faith in the atoning work of Jesus on the cross?

Most tell of having encountered a light from which emanated a love so intense that they were overwhelmed with joy. In some accounts, the dead allegedly have encountered loved ones who had gone before them, and some encountered the deity in which they had believed.

With such testimonies as these it is not surprising that many Christians have been confused about whether or not they can trust the Scriptures implicitly. It would appear as if it really doesn't matter how one lives one's life or in whom one believes for salvation.

It would be too easy and dishonest to offhandedly toss off the testimonies of non-believers as irrelevant, untruthful, hallucinatory, or even demonically inspired. This would serve no purpose toward strengthening faith in Christ or toward providing answers to the skeptics who insist that all systems of belief are equally valid.

Admittedly, it is a difficult task to stand for the truth of God's word in the face of credible eyewitness testimonies that present data in conflict with Scripture. But if God's Word is

true then we can be sure that nothing contradictory can stand the test of its light.

To answer the difficult questions these writings inspire we must first see what Scripture says on the subject of death, and then analyze the experiences of near-death subjects in the light of Scripture.

THE SCRIPTURES

The Scriptures have much to say about death, but they offer little information about the mechanics of death—that is, what actually occurs at the moment of death. They do make reference to the soul departing from the body. The first mention of this is found in Genesis 35:18 which describes Rachel's death upon giving birth to Benjamin:

And it happened, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name Benoni. But his father called him Benjamin.

In 1 Kings 17:21, Elijah prayed that God would allow the soul of a widow's dead son to come back into him:

And he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to YHWH, and said, "O YHWH, my 'Elohiym, I ask You, let this child's soul come into him again.

And YHWH heard Elijah's voice, and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived.

In many instances we read of man's soul being troubled or vexed, which further indicates that the soul is distinct from the body. Yet we also see that the spirit is often troubled (Genesis 41:8). So the term spirit is often interchanged for the word soul—or so it seems.

Much confusion has arisen over the distinction of the soul of man from the spirit of man. Some see the soul and spirit as one and the same. Others see the soul as the seat of consciousness that comes into existence upon the creation of the body joined with the spirit as the essence of life that comes from God. Scripture gives us a clue that this latter view is correct—that the spirit is distinct from the soul:

And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly, and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 5:23)

The term soul is seldom used in the writings of the apostles, but the word spirit is often used to describe the consciousness of believers. In the writings of the ancient prophets of Israel the term soul is most often used to describe the consciousness of both believers and non-believers. This seems to indicate a distinction between the fate of the believer before the resurrection of Jesus, and after His resurrection.

In any case, there are many verses that make a distinction between the soul and the spirit of men. This is especially important to know when confronted by false teachers such as the Jehovah's Witnesses who deny the existence of the soul.

From Death To Life

Ephesians 2:1 tells us that God has made alive those who were dead in trespasses and sins. Before coming to Christ our spirits are dead—that is, they are separated from God because of man's sin nature inherited from Adam.

We know from Jesus' words that one must be born again of the spirit in order to inherit eternal life (John 3:3-8). This rebirth of one's spirit occurs when one places one's faith in Jesus as his redeemer from the curse of sin—the curse that results in eternal death or separation from God. Made alive in Christ by faith, he is now transformed into a new creature who possesses eternal life. What can this mean but that the soul and the spirit are intrinsically united in some way as to make them virtually indistinguishable for the believer?

Before Christ was resurrected, the souls of all who died, whether righteous or unrighteous, went to Hades (Heb. *Sheol*). Those who were righteous through faith in God and in His promises of redemption were held in a separate compartment from those who were unrighteous. Jesus' recounting of the life of the beggar named Lazarus was not a parable, but a lesson on righteous faith and unrighteous unbelief reflected in how Lazarus and the rich man lived their lives. The point is that the soul of Lazarus was taken to a place in Hades called Abraham's Bosom, and the soul of the rich man was taken to a place of torment (Luke 16:19-31).

Scripture speaks of the soul in two manners. The first is that of describing man himself:

And YHWH 'Elohiym formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul. (Genesis 2:7)

In this and many other instances we see that man is called "a soul." In other instances, such as those quoted previously, we see that man *has* a soul. Man's soul came about through God breathing into Adam's nostrils, whereas the animals were given souls of a lower nature. Scripture does not describe how animals were given souls, yet we know that they have breath and consciousness, but not as a result of God breathing into them. Our concern is with the soul of man and what happens to his soul upon death. On the surface it appears as if there is no difference in the fate of man from that of animals:

I said in my heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that 'Elohiym might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are animals. Because that which happens to the sons of men happens to animals—even one thing happens to them: as the one dies, so dies the other. Yes, they all have one breath, so that a man has no preeminence above an animal, because all is vanity.

All go to one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

Who knows the spirit of man that goes upward, and the spirit of the animal that goes downward to the earth?

Therefore I perceive that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, because that is his portion. For who will bring him to see what shall be after him? (Ecclesiastes 3:18-22)

Some have used these Scriptures to establish various doctrines that are insupportable in light of the Scriptures as a whole and, with proper understanding, can be seen to be false. For example, some say this Scripture proves that man has no consciousness after death—death is the end of everything. Those who believe in the resurrection of the dead look upon this as a form of soul sleep—the idea that consciousness ends until the time of the resurrection. But one cannot build such far-reaching doctrines on these words alone.

There are ample Scriptures to prove the existence of consciousness after death. So it becomes obvious that Ecclesiastes was speaking of man's physical life on earth which, at death, is no different from that of animals. Once the soul has left the body there is no value to the body; it is placed in the grave to become the dust of the earth whence it came. Knowledge of what transpires on earth ceases for the dead.

When the Apostle Paul wrote that he was torn between wanting to remain with the brethren for their benefit or to be with Christ which is far better (Philippians 1:23), he was affirming that those who die in Christ are present with Him after death. Obviously, it is only the soul and the spirit of the righteous that are with Christ, because the body is in the grave awaiting the resurrection.

What is important in these verses is that the spirit of man, even before the resurrection of Christ, ascended "above," while the spirit of the animals descended "below."

What does this mean then if at that time the body was in the grave the soul was in Hades and the spirit ascended above?

Ecclesiastes 12:7 offers a clue in describing the death of man:

Then the dust shall return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return to 'Elohiym who gave it.

So we see that for both the righteous and unrighteous, their bodies have the same end—the grave; and their spirits have the same end—to return to God. The body, the vehicle in which the soul resides and to which the spirit gives animation, becomes corrupted and returns to the earthly elements of which it is made. The spirit, which came from God through the breath of God into Adam, returns to God again.

The difference is in the destination of the soul, which is the element of consciousness and in which resides all hope and aspirations for this life and the next. The souls of those who have died without faith in Christ who atoned for their sins through His shed blood upon the cross are taken to Hades where they await the resurrection to the Great White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:11-15). The souls of those who have fallen asleep in Christ—who have placed their trust not in their own righteousness but in His righteousness and

sacrifice for their sins—are taken into the presence of God and remain there until the first resurrection—the resurrection of the righteous (Revelation 20:5-6).

It appears as if the soul and the spirit of the believer are joined together in a way that makes them virtually indistinguishable, having been made alive to Christ by God's grace. They are not separated as are the soul and spirit of the unregenerate person whose spirit is dead.

When we say one's spirit is dead we don't mean that it is not functioning; we mean that it is separated from God. Death is separation from life, and Jesus said that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. As the only Way to the Father, His Truth brings Life to those who are separated from God because of the sin nature inherent to all mankind.

Because the spirit of the believer in Christ has been made alive, there will be no judgment at the resurrection of the righteous in Christ except for judgment of the works done in the flesh. The works that were unfruitful will be burned up. The works that have born spiritual fruit will be rewarded:

...You are God's farm; you are God's building. According to the grace of God which is given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it.

But let everyone take heed how he builds on it. For no one can lay another foundation than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Now if any one builds gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble on this foundation, everyone's work shall be revealed. For the day shall declare it because it shall be revealed by fire, and the fire shall test everyone's work of what sort it is.

If anyone's work abides which he has built there-upon, he shall receive a reward. If anyone's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss, but he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire. (1 Corinthians 3:9-15)

Caution is urged lest some think that one may live as one pleases and still make claim to faith in Jesus. True faith in Christ manifests itself outwardly through obedience to the Word of God.

Even so faith, if it does not have works, is dead, being alone....For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. (James 2:17-26)

Seeing that the Scriptures make a definite distinction between the fate of those in Christ and those not in Christ (those whose faith is genuine as opposed to mere confession of faith, or lack thereof), how do we reconcile these truths with the accounts of so many whose testimonies of near-death experiences appear to contradict the Scriptures, or give the impression that it makes no difference where one's faith lies?

Taking note of the near-death experiences as recorded in the best-selling books on the subject, we will address the most pertinent phenomena associated with these experiences.

CLINICAL DEATH

At the point where a person's vital signs have ceased, he is pronounced by medical science to be clinically dead. The body evidences no heartbeat, no breath, no pulse and, most importantly, no brain waves.

Incredible accounts of people being resuscitated after long periods of time during which no vital signs were present indicate that the soul of the person never actually left the body, even though the body had ceased to function. Many people offer no recollection of consciousness during that interim. It's as if they had merely fallen into a dreamless sleep. This seems to be more common among those who expired under conditions where their body temperature was far below normal, such as those who drowned in icy waters.

It appears as if sub-normal temperatures preserve life for longer periods than normal or higher-than-normal temperatures, even though vital signs may be lacking.

This raises the question of how long after clinical death the soul continues to reside in the body. Testimonies of those who claim to have seen their loved ones who had preceded them in death also raise the question of how long a soul might linger in the realm of the living before being taken to its resting place. Often such sightings are within a short time after death.

The possibility of familiar spirits imitating the dead is also viable, but Scripture is silent on whether or not a soul might be able to manifest itself to the living while still in proximity to the earthly plane.

While Scripture tells us that the ultimate fate of those who die in Christ is to be present with the Lord, and the fate of those who die apart from Christ is to be held in Hades, it does not specifically address the time interval between when the soul leaves the body and when it arrives at its intended destination.

Where Scripture is silent we may hold our opinions and theories; and it is not unreasonable to take into account the testimonies of the many who have been pronounced dead only to return to life. In virtually all the recorded testimonies of those who do have recollections of events during that interim when they left their bodies (if, in fact, they did leave their bodies) and when they returned, they almost all relate experiences that are strikingly similar.

In the interest of brevity we will examine just a few of the more important aspects of these experiences. In so doing, we must remember that whenever we attempt to understand anything that has an element of the supernatural to it we should keep in mind Paul's admonition:

Though we, or an angel from Heaven, proclaim any other gospel to you than that which we have proclaimed to you, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:8)

Experiences, testimonies and other subjective elements that inspire belief in any philosophy must be subordinated to the objective, inerrant Word of God.

THE DARK TUNNEL

The near-death experience seems to begin with what many describe as a roaring sound followed by the sensation of traveling at a great speed through a dark tunnel toward a distant light. Yet this is not always the case. Some just seem to float out of their bodies and find themselves looking down upon their own death scene. For those who do appear to travel down the tunnel, some find themselves in the area of their demise; others find themselves in the presence of some being or beings whom they may or may not recognize.

The point is that, as similar as most such experiences are, there are also variations. Seldom do two people recollect *exactly* the same thing. There are almost as many variables to the claimed experiences as there are people who relate them. Could it be that the soul is traveling through a passage within the body toward the light outside the body? Is the last breath or gasp the expelling of the soul?

Perhaps, but no one knows for certain. And such speculations only prove fruitless. Especially in view of the variety of testimonies that leave the whole subject of near-death experiences open to speculation.

THE BEING OF LIGHT

The most significant reports concern encounters with a “being of light,” who engulfs the person in an overwhelming tide of love. This being of light reveals through vivid flashbacks their past lives, and asks what they thought of how they had lived. There is no sense of condemnation, but only tolerance.

In *Life After Life*, Dr. Moody states that different people identified this being of light as someone relative to their own religion.

This raises questions in the minds of Christians who know that Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father. If we are to believe the biblical account of grace through faith in Jesus Christ there is no room for any speculation. Nor does the possibility exist that any other person can share that role with Christ. Some interesting questions come to mind.

First, if this being of light is Jesus, why did he not mention the role that grace plays in the person’s salvation? Second, why would He allow so many to return and bring with them stories (false gospels) that increase the possibility of misunderstanding?

If this being of light is not Jesus, then he must be an angelic being. But then, is he one of God’s angels, or Satan’s angels?

As to the reason for not expounding upon grace, it could be that to reveal the need for grace might actually nullify that very need in these people’s lives. Certainly they would have an advantage over others because they could in no way deny the reality of Jesus’ atonement for their sins. This would not be the result of faith on their part, but rather the result of their experience. As it stands, they are at a disadvantage, believing that no matter what, they will eventually return to this being and be ushered into eternal life.

If, in fact, this being of light is an emissary of Satan, there is no doubt as to why the subject of the person’s need for grace is not considered. What better way is there to lull many into a false sense of security than to have people return from the dead and not relate to others that they now know they must accept Jesus as their only source of salvation?

In his sequel, Dr. Moody does state that all of his subjects were of Judeo-Christian persuasion. However, even this cannot dispel concern, because we know that not all who claim to be Christians are, in fact, true believers and disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. What Moody means by “Judeo-Christian” is as vague as what anyone means by that phrase. If he means some were Jewish but not Christian, then the problem remains that those who do not believe in Christ are relating similar experiences as those who are in Christ.

Perhaps the biggest problem with this being of light is that, while called by some “the Christ,” he never concerns himself with the aspect of grace. Rather, he dwells upon the works of those who encounter him. For that matter, in no instance does he reveal himself to be Jesus.

Although relating many of his subjects’ experiences to Scripture, Dr. Moody states that “the notion that spiritual rebirth can be brought about by isolation is an integral part of the belief systems of many cultures and is reflected in many great religious writings, including the Bible.”¹ But Scripture says no such thing. Spiritual rebirth comes through faith in Jesus Christ as the only way to the Father through application of His death and resurrection to our need for cleansing from sin. Perhaps Moody meant “spiritual enlightenment,” or “spiritual experiences,” but certainly not “spiritual rebirth.”

A clue to his meaning is found in his statement that “Isolation, therefore, may very well be, along with hallucinatory drugs and a close call with death, one of several ways of entering new realms of consciousness.”²

All too true. And although Dr. Moody in no way suggests the use of hallucinatory drugs, his lack of an emphatic pronouncement against them could mislead.

Nor does Moody exclude the possibility of reincarnation. On the contrary, he recommends some reading on the subject and states that he himself, in order to attempt to gain better insight into his research, will delve into areas of the occult.³

Moody makes the mistake of assuming that the nature of one’s experience would be easily discernible were the concept of God and Satan true:

It seems to me that the best way of distinguishing between God-directed and Satan-directed experiences would be to see what the person involved does and says after his experience. God, I suppose, would try to get those to whom he appears to be loving and forgiving. Satan would presumably tell his servants to follow a course of hate and destruction. Manifestly, my subjects have come back with a renewed commitment to follow the former course and to disavow the latter.⁴

But doesn't Scripture warn that Satan is transformed into an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14)? Every false religious system with its humanist approach toward morality and good works is a deception of Satan. The difference is not between what appears to be "love" and "hate," but between life and death—between truth and error.

This leaves the strong possibility of mass delusion whereby so many merely thought they encountered a holy spiritual being. The being of light that appears to unbelievers may be a deceiving spirit sent to give men reason to think that no matter how one has lived one's life, and no matter whether or not one had placed his faith in Christ Jesus for salvation, there will be no judgment.

However, we must be careful not to assume that believers who have had near-death experiences did not actually encounter the Lord; they may have. Or not. Again, the distinction must be made between those in Christ and those not in Christ.

THE GREAT BARRIER

Many people give an account of coming to a great barrier, vaguely defined. What this barrier is, no one has been able to say. But not being able to transcend beyond it, they were compelled to return to their bodies and resume their earthly existence.

It is possible that passing through this barrier may be the final stage of transition into eternity. What lies beyond is open to conjecture. But could this be where judgment finally enters into the picture?

The fact that not one of these people encountered judgment up to the point they were allowed to advance before returning does not rule out the inevitability of that judgment. At least within the scope of current research, no one who has gone beyond that barrier has returned to tell.

NO HEAVEN OR HELL

Dr. Moody makes the point that there has been no evidence of Heaven or Hell offered by his subjects. But, again, perhaps they just never got far enough. Some have reported seeing, before going back to their bodies, a paradise-like land that was beyond their point of travel. A few reports of seeing a city of light from a distance are recorded, and Moody concedes that this could be Heaven, but only in the sequel to his first work.

But what of Hell? The closest description of anything remotely negative is the report of seeing some spirits observed within a gray, misty area, shuffling about in a state of depression and confusion. These spirits were apparently unable to comprehend their own existence or circumstances, somewhat like severely retarded persons.

Scripture tells us that those who are not in Christ will be judged by the light they have received. Could it be that this is only one area of punishment after judgment—that greater judgments await others? Dr. Moody doesn't say, but rather contents himself with the statement that there is no indication of there being a Heaven or Hell in the biblical sense.

Of course, he is being scientifically objective when he makes these statements. The danger, however, is that most readers will assume that this objective reporting has revealed that no such places exist. The idea will elude them that, in fact, these alleged experiences have not proven that they do not exist.

Moody's words should leave Christians with a sense of caution as to whether to place any stock in these testimonies:

So I am left, not with conclusions or evidence or proofs, but with something much less definite—feelings, questions, analogies, puzzling facts to be explained.⁵

Before we take up the writings of someone not grounded in God's Word, we must be sure that *we* are grounded in God's Word.

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. (Ephesians 6: 12)

Rather than pursue this subject through the writings of inadequately prepared reporters—rather than trust the experiences of people who may or may not have died in the true sense of the word—it would be better to allow God's Word to speak to us on the subject of death and what transpires afterwards:

And as it is appointed to men to die one time, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered one time to bear the sins of many. And to those who look for Him he shall appear the second time without sin unto salvation. (Hebrews 9:27-28)

Man may investigate and speculate on the phenomena that accompany death, but Scripture already tells us all we need to know. It may comfort those without faith in Christ to believe that they have nothing to fear after death. But Paul's sobering words to the Body of Christ—to those who have faith in Christ—should not be taken lightly:

For we know Him who has said, "Vengeance belongs to Me, I will recompense," says the Lord. And again, "The Lord shall judge his people."

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:31)

If these words are meant to bring up short those who have salvation through Christ, how much more should they be related to those who have failed to trust Him? How much more should we all live in accordance with His Word and not on the subjective reports of people who didn't go far enough to know the ultimate truth?❖

¹ Raymond A. Moody, MD., *Life After Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), p. 174.

² *Ibid.*, p. 175.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

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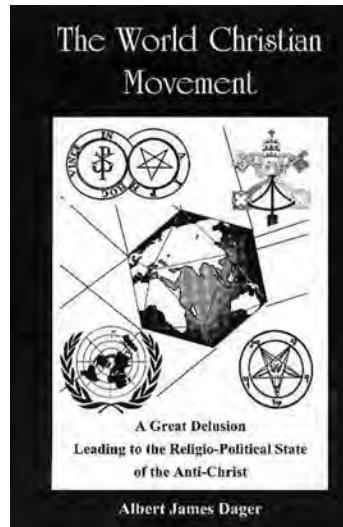
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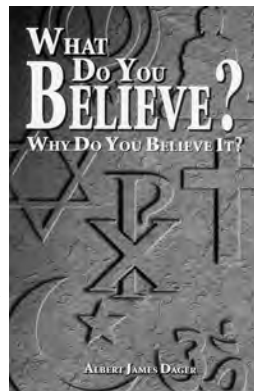
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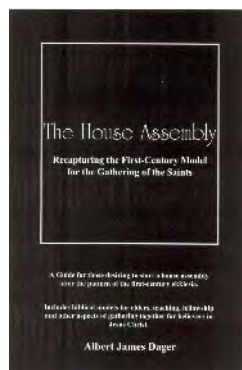
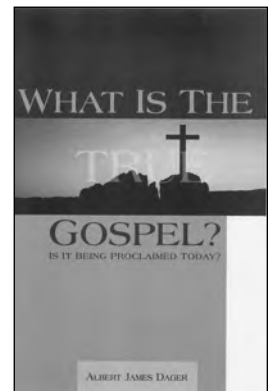


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Jesus proclaimed what He called "the Gospel of the Kingdom." He then commissioned His disciples to go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom to all the nations. But even from the beginning there have been false gospels proclaimed by those claiming to be messengers of God. Today we are witnessing a great apostasy based largely on institutional traditions. Many false gospels emanating from pulpits, radio, and television—even many that seem to glorify Jesus—differ from the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus. This book points the reader back to Scripture to discover the original Gospel.

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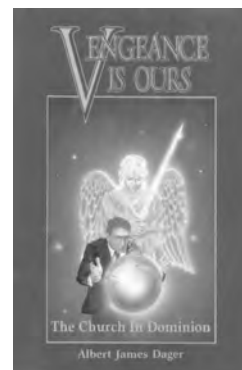


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