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Recovering the Gospel

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THE recovery of the original gospel is one of the burning issues of current New Testament criticism. The investigation takes us behind the canonical books and requires us to trace the literary processes which helped to shape them. We are familiar with the methods of what is technically known as form criticism as applied to the four Gospels and more recently to the book of Acts. The latest research in this field, however, is turning its attention increasingly to the epistles and it is with this that we are concerned in the present article. The enquiry is in the early stages of development and comparatively little can be read about it as yet in English. Form critical analysis of the epistles is not nearly so complex as in the case of the Gospels. Positive results are already beginning to appear in the detection and isolation of confessional or catechetical material enshrining a recognized statement of the gospel derived from a strand of tradition which can be ascribed to a much earlier date than the letter in which it is found. It is becoming apparent that these occasional formulae—most of them fragmentary, though a few are more substantial—summarize the major emphases of the gospel as later expanded by Paul and other New Testament writers. The consequence is that the gap between the more developed presentation of the gospel and its primitive origin is gradually being closed. The essential identity between the two is recognized. The existence of some nebulous non-dogmatic version of the Christian message prior to the later emergence of what used to be dismissed as merely a Pauline complication is now seen to be hypothetical. The primitive gospel was the biblical gospel in a nutshell.

The form critical approach to the epistles is still in its infancy and for that reason we must be on our guard against any hasty and unwarrantable dogmatism. However, the criteria employed for detecting confessional affirmations (or *homologiai*) have been thoroughly tested and refined. Often the most reliable guide is the language of the immediate context. Such insertions are invariably introduced by the verbs to deliver, to believe, and to confess. The syntax often supplies a clue. These declarations are often prefaced by *hos* (who) or *hoti* (that). A fondness for antithesis is a recurring feature and the formulae are often rhythmic in structure. Most significantly for the purposes of our enquiry, they refer to the elementary truths and events of salvation history as standards.

According to R. H. Fuller 'they are concerned with the basic kerygmatic affirmations about the incarnation, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ'.¹ They reflect the beliefs of the Palestinian Christian community in the years immediately following the crucifixion. Many of them are thought to have originated in the first decade of the Church.

In view of their exceptionally early provenance it is more difficult to dispose of them in terms of a developed community belief. E. F. Harrison, writing as an evangelical scholar, has deplored this 'church theology' as 'the bane of Gospel criticism' and we may sympathize with his attitude.² But this sharp distinction between the later faith of the Church and the immediate post-Easter understanding of the gospel is much harder to sustain in the case of such primitive confessions. Form criticism has bridged the gulf. If these early affirmations are indeed the product of the community, it was the community of the apostles themselves which was responsible for them. At this initial stage, at least, apostolic tradition and Church theology were virtually identical. For this reason Rudolf Schnackenburg prefers to replace the expression 'community theology' by 'the theology of the first apostles and the primitive church', if by 'community theology' is meant a creation of the corporate Christian mind which is divorced from God's revelation in Christ.³

These *homologiai* seem to have been confined in the first instance to simple, single-clause Christologies. The most popular as well as the most concise is the declaration that Jesus is Lord. 'No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except under the influence of the Holy Spirit,' Paul assures the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 12.3). Again he tells the Romans: 'If on your lips is the confession "Jesus is Lord", and in your heart the faith that God raised him from the dead then you will find salvation. For the faith that leads to righteousness is in the heart and the confession that leads to salvation is on the lips' (Romans 10.9, 10). In all probability such an acknowledgement was associated with the sacrament of baptism. A textual variant interestingly supports the hypothesis that in the second passage Paul is quoting precise formulae. In Romans 10.9 several Alexandrian witnesses insert *to rhēma* (the word) and alter the accusative construction, making the verse read like this: 'If you confess the word with your mouth that Jesus is Lord.' The expression recurs in Philipians 2.11 where it is also prefaced by the recitative *hoti*: 'and every tongue confess, "Jesus is Lord" to the glory of God the Father'. The NEB recognizes that this is a quotation by enclosing it in inverted commas, as in the two previous instances.

These single-clause confessions of Jesus as Lord were soon expanded to become two-article formulae including an acknowledgement that God is Father. Oscar Cullmann recognizes 1 Corinthians 8.5, 6 as 'a very old bi-partite formula'.⁴ 'For as there is one God,

the Father, from whom all being comes, towards whom we move; and there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things come to be and we through him.' It is significant that in another excerpt found in Ephesians 'one Lord' (v.5) appears in association with 'one God' (v.6). The link is even more explicit in 1 Timothy 2.5—'For there is one God, and also one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus, himself man, who sacrificed himself to win freedom for all mankind.' It seems clear that in the primitive Church bi-partite formulae were extant which jointly recognized God as Father and Jesus as Lord. At a later stage these were expanded to embrace the Holy Spirit. Such tripartite clauses are more numerous than was once realized and, as Canon J. N. D. Kelly points out, 'the impression inevitably conveyed is that the conception of the threefold manifestation of the Godhead was embedded deeply in Christian thinking from the start and provided a ready-to-hand mould in which the ideas of the apostolic writers took shape'.⁵

Other two-article confessional clauses refer to Christ alone. They reflect a pattern which contrasts the humiliation of his death with the glory of his resurrection. An example is to be found in Romans 8.34—'It is Christ—Christ who died, and, more than that was raised from the dead—who is at God's right hand, and indeed pleads our cause.' Or again in 2 Corinthians 13.4—'He died on the cross in weakness, but he lives by the power of God.' Otto Michel regards Romans 4.24, 25 as preserving a very early tradition either from a confession or a hymn.⁶ Christians are there described as those 'who have faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead; for he was delivered to death for our misdeeds and raised to life to justify us'. Form criticism thus provides us with a new way of interpreting the epistles and is establishing the fact that passages like these, which epitomize the essentials of the evangelical faith, date back beyond the time when Paul wrote to the years soon after the Easter event itself.

We have already indicated that a few of these confessional extracts are rather lengthier than the snippets we have so far reviewed. Reference must be made to the most fundamental of all in 1 Corinthians 15.3-7, which Eduard Meyer regarded as 'the oldest document of the Christian Church we possess'.⁷ In a discerning article, Eduard Schweizer has compared two New Testament creeds: 1 Corinthians 15.3-5 and 1 Timothy 3.16.⁸ Let us set them side by side: 1 Corinthians 15.3-5—'First and foremost, I handed on to you the facts which had been imparted to me: that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised to life on the third day, according to the scriptures; and that he appeared to Cephas, and afterwards to the Twelve.' 1 Timothy 3.16—'And great beyond all question is the mystery of our religion: "He who was manifested in the body, vindicated in the spirit, seen by

angels; who was proclaimed among the nations, believed in throughout the world, glorified in heaven".⁹

This is Schweizer's comment: 'We hear the voice of a church existent some time before the first lines of our New Testament were written. And it is not simply a casual fragment, such as one might find in the sand of Egypt. It is a creed in which the Church concentrated the most important points of her faith. It must be at least the Church in Antioch—probably even in Jerusalem—which speaks here.'

Attention has been drawn even more recently to the extended confessional hymns contained in Philippians 2.6-11 and Colossians 1.13-20. We are indebted to an outstanding conservative scholar, Professor Ralph Martin, for detailed research into the original form and setting of these great Christological passages.¹⁰ A consensus of those who adopt the form-critical approach supports his contention that in both these paragraphs Paul has incorporated into his text confessional material of a much earlier date. The implications are weighty indeed, for it would be difficult to discover anywhere in the New Testament a more thorough-going presentation of Christ as both human and divine and as possessing cosmic significance. This means that the primitive Christology was a high Christology. It is thought that in Philippians 2.8 the words 'death on a cross' may represent a Pauline addition, but the rest is regarded as primitive.

Several passages in Romans have been isolated by the experts as probably reflecting early doctrinal formulae of a similar kind. We have already noted Romans 4.24, 25. Even Paul's definitive statement concerning his central doctrine of justification by faith in Romans 3.24-26 is now regarded as falling into this category. It reads: 'All are justified by God's free grace alone, through his act of liberation in the person of Christ Jesus. For God designed him to be the means of expiating sin by his sacrificial death, effective through faith. God meant by this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had overlooked the sins of the past—to demonstrate his justice now in the present, showing that he is himself just and justifies any man who puts his faith in Jesus.' As C. H. Dodd realized, 'these verses are an amplification of what Paul had set out in Chapter 1.18 as constituting the gospel of which he was unashamed'.¹¹

The letter to the Romans opens with an announcement of what this gospel is. After the conventional greeting, Paul immediately proceeds to explain the nature of the good news which he has been commissioned to proclaim. On linguistic grounds the form critics believe that he is appealing to an already recognized doctrinal summary. Even in English it sounds like a potted creed.¹² It is apparently triadic in form as is presupposed by the rendering of the Peshitta: 'Concerning his Son, who was born according to the flesh of the seed of David's house; and made known as the Son of God with power and holy

spirit; who rose from the house of the dead, even Jesus Messiah our Lord.' Fuller is persuaded that there is nothing against a Palestinian origin for this formula.¹³ The gospel is said to be focused on Christ as the Son of God. He is nevertheless acknowledged as being born man, though significantly of David's line. His divine origin and nature was manifested by the resurrection so that he is recognized as Messiah and Lord. We can trace a parallel between this account of the gospel at the outset of Romans and what is contained in 1 Corinthians 15.3-7. The same emphases recur in the preaching of Peter as reported in Acts.

What, then, is the overall outcome of such research into the confessional formulae embedded in the Pauline epistles? Once again, we must remind ourselves that this line of enquiry is still in the nursery stage and that some of its hypotheses have yet to be finally substantiated. We have confined our survey to those passages about which there now seems to be fairly general agreement. By way of interim report it is surely legitimate to suggest that we are beginning to discern an outline of the gospel as it took shape in the apostolic church. The salient features may be classified like this:

- 1 The good news is about Christ. He is the centre of the gospel. The evidence justifies the claim of Cullmann that 'proclamation of Christ is the starting point of every Christian confession'.¹⁴
- 2 The good news focuses on the death and resurrection of Christ as redemptive events. Antithesis is one of the characteristics of the *homologiai* and the most typical contrast is that between the shame of Christ's death and the triumph of his resurrection.
- 3 The good news concerns Christ in his relation to the Father. From the start he is seen as a unique figure. This is apparent from the titles ascribed to him—Messiah, Lord, and Son of God. The confessional hymn in Philippians 2.5-11 affirms that Christ had always shared the divine nature yet did not consider that his equality with God was a prize to be hung on to at all costs, but was prepared to make himself nothing when he assumed the role of slave.
- 4 The good news announces that Christ who was God with God was also man among men. No incipient Docetism is apparent. Christ was born of David's stock on the human level and manifested in the flesh.
- 5 The gospel relates the death of Christ to the forgiveness of sins. The historical fact 'Christ died' is given a theological interpretation: 'Christ died for our sins.' This, moreover, is said to be in accordance with the Scriptures, namely those of the Old Testament. As Professor Kingsley Barrett agrees, such a phrase vindicates the explication of Christ's death by means of such Hebrew categories as sacrifice, atonement, suffering, sin-bearing and the righteous remnant.¹⁵

- 6 The good news refers to Christ who died a real death and whose body was buried in a known grave. F. F. Bruce concludes that the burial clause in 1 Corinthians 15.4 'bespeaks belief in the empty tomb.'¹⁶
- 7 The good news proclaims that Christ was raised from the dead and appeared to credible witnesses. The resurrection supplied the assurance that the Jesus of history lives on as the Christ of faith. Christians do not commemorate a cultic hero or martyr of the past. They worship, serve and testify to a living Lord.
- 8 The permanence of the resurrection is further attested by the exaltation of Christ as he is now 'glorified in high heaven', according to 1 Timothy 3.16. The hymn in Philippians 2 looks forward to the day when at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven, on earth, and in the depths—and every tongue confess that he is Lord.
- 9 The cosmic significance of Christ's Lordship is brought out in Colossians 1.16-20, where it is asserted that the whole universe has been created through him and for him and that it is God's purpose to reconcile all things by means of him.
- 10 The good news claims that faith in the Christ thus set forth in the gospel puts men right with God and liberates them from the bondage of the past.

This, then, is the primitive gospel. This is 'the faith which God entrusted to his people once and for all' (Jude 3). It is a tradition older than the New Testament itself and on which the New Testament draws. It is this realization that the gospel took shape prior to the compilation of the New Testament Scriptures which paves the way for an appreciation of its firm historical rootage. This is not, of course, to deny or to detract from the authority of Scripture, for these early confessions are incorporated into Scripture. It is rather to show that Scripture itself bears witness to an unbroken doctrinal tradition deriving from the apostles themselves. It was, after all, to them that Jesus had entrusted the promulgation of the gospel. His own authentication of the New Testament Scriptures lay in the apostolic commission. While the documents were being compiled and awaited canonization, the oral and written traditions existed side by side. Hence Paul could urge the Thessalonians to stand firm and 'hold fast the traditions you have learned from us by word or letter' (2 Thessalonians 2.15).

Recently the Church has been suffering from what Professor Gilbert Murray in quite another context once described as a failure of nerve.¹⁷ Confidence in the gospel is diminishing. We are no longer so certain that the news of the Christ-event is indeed, as Paul assured the Romans, 'the saving power of God for everyone who has faith' (1.18). Much of our current hesitation stems from misgivings about the pedigree of the message. Does it rest on early and reliable founda-

tions or is it the product of a later rationalization? Our enquiries will have gone some way at least to reassure those whose confidence has been impaired. What we need today is not a new message, though of course we have to reinterpret it in a relevant manner. What we need is a new conviction that the gospel is still sufficient to accomplish God's purposes in our society. When we really believe in the gospel we will no longer shrink from proclaiming it by word, life and action.

Notes

- 1 Reginald H. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (1966), p.18.
- 2 Everett F. Harrison, 'Gemeindeftheologie: The Bane of Gospel Criticism', in *Jesus of Nazareth: Saviour and Lord*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (1966), pp.159-73.
- 3 Rudolf Schnackenburg, *La Théologie du Nouveau Testament* (1961), p.15.
- 4 Oscar Cullman, *Early Christian Confessions* (ET 1949), p. 51; cf. Vernon H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (1963), p.45.
- 5 J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (1950), p.23.
- 6 Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer*, *Kritisch-Exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament* (1955), pp.30-1.
- 7 Eduard Meyer, *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums*, Bd.3 (1923), p.210.
- 8 Eduard Schweizer, 'Two New Testament Creeds Compared: 1 Corinthians 15.3-5 and 1 Timothy 3.16', in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation*, ed. William Klassen and Graydon F. Snyder (1962), pp.166-77.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.167.
- 10 Ralph P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Interpretation and the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (1967); *Colossians: The Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty* (1972), pp.40-55; *Colossians and Philemon*, *New Century Bible* (1974), pp.61-6.
- 11 C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, *Moffatt New Testament Commentary* (1932), p.49.
- 12 A. M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors* (1961), p.24.
- 13 Reginald H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (1965), p.165.
- 14 Cullmann, *op. cit.*, p.39.
- 15 C. Kingsley Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, *Black's New Testament Commentaries* (1968), pp.338-9.
- 16 F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, *New Century Bible* (1971), p.139.
- 17 Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (1935), p.123.