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THE SPIRITUAL BACKGROUND OF OUR GOSPELS

THE testimony of the life and work of Jesus Christ has been transmitted to the Church in fourfold form, unlike in language, in statement of the facts, perhaps also in their chronology. That difference of the evangelical accounts has often induced the theological scholars to overlook the deep fundamental unity of the gospels, which were even said to be irreconcilable in content and purpose. For the Higher Criticism of the last decades the Synoptics passed for more reliable historical sources than St. John, whose book was reviewed by many distinguished theologians in England and Germany as a book that cannot lay claim to historical trustworthiness and is incompatible with the synoptical sketch of Jesus. It is not the intention of this essay to examine the relation of the Synoptics with the fourth gospel in all particulars and to look into all conjectures of the critics. That would overstep the space of our *Quarterly*.

I

We do not, of course, deny that there are many and grave differences between the gospels, but we maintain that these differences do in no way warrant the opinion that the Jesus of the Synoptics should not be consistent with the Jesus St. John knew and preached. The Church has always professed the unity of the evangelical tradition despite the differences she has never disputed. Nobody characterizes the peculiarities of the gospels better than John Calvin in his preface to his commentary of St. John where he says: "That is the difference between the gospel-writers, that the three first are more detailed in the narration of the life and death of Jesus Christ. St. John, on the other hand, likes to explain before all the office of Christ and the efficacy of His death and of His resurrection. The Synoptics do by no means pass over in silence the coming of Christ for the salvation of the world and they testify loudly, that He

through His sacrifice has reconciled the world unto God and has blotted out its sins. St. John is far from being indifferent about the historical facts, but he strives more than the others to show us the virtue and fruit of the coming of Christ. Therefore it is my custom to say, that the gospel of St. John is the key of understanding the Synoptics". In his interpretation of St. Matthew ii. 1 Calvin writes: "The Spirit of God has led the Evangelists in that manner, that they all wrote the same history in full harmony, but every one in his own way".

If many did not understand better this unity and set up one gospel in opposition to the others, they were influenced by the hypothesis, that in the gospels, especially in the Synoptics, we have fragments of a biography of Jesus. The task of theology should consist in composing a biography of Jesus out of those fragments. Already in 1902 Martin Kaehler at Halle in his famous pamphlet, *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtlich-biblische Christus*, had exposed this erroneous idea; till Albert Schweitzer in his extensive work *Geschichte der Leben Jesuforschung*, has made impossible for ever the attempt to transform the four gospels into a biography of Jesus. In order to discern the unity of the gospels, we have in the first place to inquire for their spiritual background. And what is that? Nothing but this: without exception the gospels proclaim Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, the Son of God, our only Saviour. In his penetrating lucidity John Calvin has thus stated the facts: "Because the mere history would not be sufficient and contribute nothing to our salvation, the Evangelists do not report only that Christ has been born, that He has died and risen on the third day, but they witness for what purpose Christ has been born, has died and risen, and what fruit we get from these events".

II

In the beginning of St. Mark we read: "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"; and St. John stood amazed crying: "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth". The one man does not speak the same words as the other, but the matter is the same. Both are not historians but messengers of a good news, of the marvellous reality that God, so loved the world,

that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. The eyes of both men saw the Son of man revealing God's majesty in himself. If St. Luke dedicates his book to his friend Theophilus to make him know "the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed", so his words are only another expression for the purpose of St. John, who asserts at the close of his gospel: "These signs are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye might have life through his name". Calvin is thus right in saying: "The gospel-writers have set forth Christ, given by the Father, before our eyes, in order that our faith may recognize him as the founder of heaven by life, and with one accord they want to testify that in the person of Christ Jesus all promises of God are fulfilled". The Son of God, before whom the daemons must tremble, who forgives us our sins, giving his life a ransom for many, revealing to us the glory of God the Most High, the Son of man, whose decision determines our eternal destiny,—that is the mighty theme of St. Matthew not less than of St. John. Not for nothing do the Synoptics place at the beginning the baptism of Jesus and remind their readers of the voice of God: "Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased"; just as St. John impresses the words of the Baptist on our mind: "I knew him not, but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me: Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost; and I saw and bare record, that this is the Son of God". The common spiritual background of the gospels becomes obvious in all such and similar utterances, of which we have singled out only a few examples. If we have understood this background, we shall no longer be misled by the differences in the gospel-accounts. Each one of the Evangelists has seen the Christ with his own eyes and told what was in his opinion of the greatest consequence, but they all without exception bring good tidings of great joy to all people.

III

Moreover: all the gospels are written in the light of the cross; the way of their Lord they describe, on which they have accompanied their Master, was the way of sorrow and agony,

overshadowed from the beginning by the most ignominious death. The whole gospel illustrates the parable of the corn of wheat that must die to bring forth much fruit. Before relating the words and deeds of Jesus, St. John suggests the lot his Lord had to undergo: "He came unto his own, and his own received him not." At the threshold of his book we see the cross. When at the first passover that Jesus after His baptism celebrated in Jerusalem, many people believed in Him, we hear: "He did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men." Any chapter of the fourth gospel points to Calvary. The transition from St. John to the others is not a transition into a strange world, we breathe the same spiritual air in St. Matthew, St. Mark and St. Luke. God's Son suffering and crucified is the object of their preaching and adoration. In the first pages of his gospel St. Mark depicts the growing hostility of the Jewish rulers against the Messiah and the counsel that the Pharisees took with the Herodians, how they might destroy Him. In St. Luke Simeon calls the child of Mary a sign which shall be spoken against. St. Matthew reminds us of the prophecy of the Lord in the early days of His work: "Can the children of the bride chamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them." As often as the gospels mention the name of Jesus, they have in view Jesus the crucified, who aimed at nothing else than to minister and to give His life a ransom for many. The word of John the Baptist: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world", does not belong to the fourth evangelist alone, it is the true expression of a reality, that is common to the evangelists at all. St. Matthew as well as St. John sings the one psalm:

O Sacred Head, surrounded
 By crown of piercing thorn!
 O bleeding Head, so wounded,
 Reviled and put to scorn!
 Beneath Thy Cross abiding
 For ever would I rest,
 In Thy dear love confiding,
 And with Thy presence blest.

IV

The wondrous cross, yes—the Man on the tree, blessed be His holy name—but also Jesus the Prince of glory! Our

gospels are glad tidings of victory. We should misconceive their spiritual background by forgetting that the man Jesus, the Teacher of His disciples, who went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed of the devil, had impressed Himself on the hearts of His apostles as the Lord and giver of life, as the Victor over the death. Nobody besides God can speak such words as Jesus spoke according to St. John: "Before Abraham was, I am"; "He that believes on me has everlasting life, I am that bread of life"; "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes unto the Father but by me." The same claim becomes audible in the testimony of the Synoptics: Jesus the Lord of heaven, who gives the Keys of the Kingdom and builds His Church on the rock, who determines eternal issues with sovereign power. In the Synoptics we learn the parables of the great supper, of the ten virgins, of the Son of man, who separates the nations one from another and divides the sheep from the goats. St. Matthew has heard Jesus foreboding His second coming with the exhortation: "Watch for ye know neither the day nor the hour, wherein the Son of man comes", and according to St. John the disciples get the comforting promise: "I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you." Both men knew the reign of God in indissoluble relation with the person of Jesus, who revealed to them the mystery of God's superabounding grace, as St. John has summarized it in the words: "Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ, and of His fulness have all we received, and grace for grace." Jesus is the Prince of glory, at whose feet the Evangelists were seated. We have tried, in short outlines, to sketch the Spiritual background of our Gospels, that links them together. Therefore the Church has done well in professing the unity of the Gospel despite the existing difficulties. The Spiritual background of the four gospel-writers is the same.

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