

New Testament Settings of the Gospel With Implications for Biblical Studies and Contemporary Apologetics

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THIS PAPER is composed of two sections. The first is a study of the New Testament data which indicates that the Christian gospel was expressed in a number of variant ways in the First Century. This study is introductory to the second section inasmuch as it illustrates aspects of certain problems associated with the Christian faith. The second section of the paper is an attempt to follow the implications of the first study into those areas.

The New Testament study will consist of a comparative analysis of four variant forms through which the New Testament writers expressed the Gospel. These are henceforth identified in this paper by the arbitrary terminology: (1. The Apostolic, (2. The Johannine, (3. The Colossian-Ephesian, (4. The Apocalyptic. This list could be extended as the recent work by Conzelmann in Luke-Acts, James Robinson in Mark and others in Hebrews indicates. Therefore, this first study makes no pretense at being inclusive. It is rather to be seen as an exploration of a facet of the early Christian community's life and its implications for certain of our concerns.

The second section of the paper considers two contemporary issues. First, the nature and content of the Christian gospel, which includes the possibility and character of a "core" of the Gospel. This will involve us in an investigation

of the relationship of gospel and language. The second issue centers about the problem of apologetics. This will also include observations on the possibility and legitimacy of syncretism.

I

Settings of the Gospel in the New Testament

The study will proceed as follows: first, a brief outline of the gospel as it appears in each of the four settings: next, selected themes of the gospel will be traced through each of the settings, noting continuities and changes where they are evident. Then the study will be summarized.

Outlines of the Gospel According To Each of the Four Settings

1. The Apostolic Setting of the Gospel: The basic source is the Apostolic preaching in Acts and the indisputably Pauline works.

God acted in the history of the nation Israel for the expressed purpose of redeeming his people. As the prophets had promised, He acted again to continue and fulfill that work, i.e. to realize the Kingdom of God. This reign will be the fulfillment of history, that is, the complete realization of the individual and corporate life to which man was created. The Kingdom is ushered in, by a man, John the Baptist, who marked the close of the old realm. The inaugurating agent of the Kingdom is another man, the Anointed (Messiah) born of a woman, subject to the limitations of time and place. This human Son of God-Messiah figure is Jesus. He both announces the inbreaking and is

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himself the first indication of the in-breaking of the Kingdom in present time. Although genuinely present, it is only partially realized and so waits a future time for its completion. However, since the kingdom has entered time, men cannot avoid responding to it. Their response is either acceptance and righteousness or intentional rejection which is prideful sin. The latter response was almost universal, and resulted in the humiliation and death of the Messiah. However, all this is according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. God vindicates the Messiah by destroying death's hold on him. The Messiah is thus uniquely resurrected, and thus becomes the first instance of the realized kingdom and thereby an earnest of its eventual and universal realization. However, as the fulfillment of God's work, it will also be a judgment and destruction of all unrighteousness. Through God's special action, the resurrected Messiah becomes the supernatural Lord, whose return to earth will be the sign of that eschatological day. Until that day, anyone who accepts this unique activity in trustful commitment, shares in the life through the Holy Spirit. The church is this community of sharers.

2. The Johannine setting of the Gospel: The sources are the Fourth Gospel and the First Letter of John.

Preexistent with and in some way nearly identical with God is the Logos. The Logos shaped the cosmos and thereby is the Truth which underlies existence. The Logos faces a corresponding power which is the antithesis of itself, except that its power is not ultimate, i.e., a modified dualism. Both powers seek the belief-commitment of men. The darkness-evil-death side is apparently dominant. The Logos became *sarx* (entered temporal existence) in Jesus. A man, John, was sent as a witness to this incarnation of the Truth. The result of the incarnation is revelation. Those who are elected receive the revelation of the Truth and enter immediately into a qualitatively different existence, eter-

nal life. Their response is belief in the revelation. The incarnation of the Truth looks forward to the future coming of an agent which will give understanding of the revelation, the Holy Comforter. The darkness-evil-death side of the dualism apparently overcomes and brings about the crucifixion of the incarnate revelation. The apparent defeat is a part of God's plan and is actually the final proclamation of the revelation.

3. The Colossian-Ephesian Setting of the Gospel:

Preexistent with God is the Beloved Son, in whom all the fullness of God dwells without reservation. The Beloved Son is the agent through which "all things" (*ta panta*) are created and in whom *ta panta* hold together as a corporate unit in spite of their inherent variety. Through some unstated catastrophe, *ta panta* become opposed to their rightful Lord. Mankind, through willful disobedience has passed under the dominion of these rebellious powers. In Jesus, the Beloved Son shares the existence of humanity. Through his death, he broke the dominion of the powers. Thereby men are released from their slavery. Through his resurrection-ascent, the beloved Son reassumes his ultimate authority over *ta panta*. Men who have shared in his death to the powers may also share immediately in his glorification. All this is according to the purpose of God's will, and is the fulfillment of His plan which encompasses all time. However, the total reunification of *ta panta* is not yet accomplished. Therefore the present lot of the elect is suffering, although the Holy Spirit is the seal of the promise of their participation in the renewed unity. The church is identified with the realized unity.

4. The Apocalyptic Setting of the Gospel: The Revelation to John is the source.

There are two realms, the temporal and the eternal, the earth and heavens. These two are distinct yet so closely interrelated that events in one are

precisely correlated by events in the other. In this double realm there is a supernatural figure, The Son of Man—Jesus. Through his life, but especially in his death as the sacrificial Lamb and faithful witness, a conflict is waged with dualistic powers in open warfare against God. However, throughout the entire battle, God is in complete control. The warfare, being expressed in both realms, is associated with cosmic and universal effects and implications. Participation in the warfare is through corporate entities, e.g., Michael's army vs. the dragon's army and the corresponding church vs. the state. Those choosing to share in the life of Christ-Son of Man, will share in his sufferings and martyrdom immediately but will also share in his victory and newness at the end. On the other hand, those choosing to share in the rebellious forces of sin, are certain to share in the total defeat and destruction of these powers. The eventual resolution of the conflict is completely in the hands of God. The resolution will be accompanied by the annihilation of the evil powers and the physical blessedness of the faithful witness-martyrs in an incorruptible new order. The entire drama is thoroughly eschatological, meaning not simply that it deals with the end of time but that it deals with the purpose and fulfillment of time.

Consistencies and Variations Found in The Four Settings of the Gospel¹

Jesus Christ: Apostolic, Johannine,

¹ The themes selected for comparison in this analysis are not necessarily definite of the Gospel. Some themes may have been omitted. This does not necessarily impair the validity of the section, in so far as our major purpose is to demonstrate that there is both a peculiar kind of consistency and a peculiar lack of consistency in New Testament expressions of the Gospel.

The themes are stated in terminology which is intentionally non-Biblical. This is an effort to avoid having the analysis of the various settings excessively shaped by one of the settings analyzed. Of course, it is admitted that the themes chosen for comparison likewise tend to pre-determine our analysis, but this is unavoidable.

Colossian - Ephesian: clearly central; Apocalyptic: central but tending to share scene with God.

Jesus' humanity: Apostolic: unequivocally human, "born of woman"; Johannine and Colossian-Ephesian: more emphasis on pre-existence but insisting that the crucial work was accomplished while in a human form; Apocalyptic: no special emphasis save that it refuses to separate the earthly and heavenly realms.

Jesus' deity: Apostolic: chief emphasis on Messiah concept, but also has the note of later exaltation; Johannine: incarnate Logos; Colossian-Ephesian: pre-existent fullness of God; Apocalyptic: subservient to God but shares his glory.

God: All four settings insist that the entire drama is accomplished solely through God's will, even the apparent defeat.

The recipient of salvation: Apostolic: heavy use of second person pronouns; Johannine: salvation is individualistic; Colossian-Ephesian: emphasis on cosmic salvation but also speaks of individual sharing in Christ's death to worldly powers and being raised to God's glory; Apocalyptic: the Faithful Witness and faithful witness. That is all four claim with variations claim the centrality of man in salvation.

The occasion of salvation: Apostolic: sin; Johannine: pernicious dualism; Colossian-Ephesian: disobedience; Apocalyptic: a bellicose dualism.

Man's response to salvation: Apostolic: faith-trust in God's action; Johannine: faith-belief in revelation; Colossian-Ephesian: participation in death and resurrection; Apocalyptic: conquering by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of the testimony.

The scene of salvation: In spite of the pre-existent and/or heavenly categories of the Johannine, Colossians-Ephesians and Apocalyptic, all four agree that the crucial event of salvation took place in time.

The crucial event which effected sal-

vation: The Apostolic: emphasis rests on the resurrection; Johannine: emphasis rests on the incarnation; Colossian-Ephesian: the emphasis rests on the crucifixion; Apocalyptic: the society of the Christ event.

The extent of salvation: Again, although there is a variation of statement, each expression insists on the unlimited boundaries of God's activity. The Johannine seems to be consciously trying to destroy the old Jewish exclusivism and goes on to insist that the response of faith alone is necessary. The Colossian-Ephesian setting speaks of the glorious unity of *ta panta* in Christ, stating that all walls have been torn down. The Apocalyptic speaks of the multitude from every nation (political), tribe (racial), people (religious), and tongue (cultural). The Apostolic interprets the Jewish nation as the necessary historical vehicle leading to the universalization of salvation.

The instrument for extending salvation: The Apostolic: The church interpreted as the messianic community "sharing" (*koinonia*) in the life and work of the Messiah; The Johannine: an elective community deriving its existence from Christ and continuing his self-revelatory-salvation work; Colossian-Ephesian: identified as the fullness of Christ; Apocalyptic: the church is both the interim participator in Christ's warfare and the future consummation of salvation.

Historical element: Apostolic: a continuation of Israel's history; Johannine: neither past nor future time is emphasized, but inasmuch as the underlying truths "disclose the present moment as the fullness of time" (Minear), the writer is concerned with the meaning of history; Colossian-Ephesian: God's plan for the fullness of time; Apocalyptic: the future promise which illuminates the present and the past.

The Gift to men: Apostolic: the Kingdom of God as the fulfillment of the covenant; Johannine: eternal life; Colossian-Ephesian: the fullness of him who

fills all in all; Apocalyptic: the New Jerusalem, Heaven and earth.

The character of the act of God: All four affirm an act in human history but they also affirm that this act is unique, outside the empirical cause-effect chain. Somehow this act carries with it the power unto salvation, i.e., it is neither natural event nor sheer happening.

The victory over personal death: Apostolic: a future promise because of Christ's resurrection; Johannine: no significant concern; Colossian-Ephesian: no mention for "death" is only death to worldly powers; Apocalyptic: strong emphasis.

The Holy Spirit: Apostolic: present reality characterizing Christian life; Johannine: future illuminator as Holy Comforter; Colossian-Ephesians: seal of the promised unity; Apocalyptic: no mention.

Continuity with Israel: Only in the Apostolic; perhaps hinted at in the Apocalyptic.

Final act of history: Apostolic: return of Messiah as Son of Man; Johannine: none; Colossian-Ephesian: unity of *ta panta* under Son; Apocalyptic: Second advent of Son of Man.

Dualism: Apostolic and Colossians-Ephesians: highly modified form; Johannine and Apocalyptic: clearly dualistic although modified from the absolute, metaphysical dualism of the East.

Summary of the Study of the Four Settings of the Gospel

We have noted that the New Testament writers all share such elements as: centrality of Christ as human and divine; sovereignty of God; concern for man; seriousness of sin; necessity of response of faith; activity within history in the life of Jesus; fulfillment of history; unique gift to man.

We have also noted that differences in the setting or expression of these shared elements was more often the rule than was similarity. There was very little congruity of setting.

Again we have noted that many ele-

ments were not to be found in all four settings. These included the matter of personal death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit, continuity with Israel and the final act of history.

II

Implications of This Study for the Issue of the Nature of the Gospel and for the Issue of the Possibility of Syncretism-Apologetics

The first issue chosen for special attention through the foregoing study is the nature and content of the Christian Gospel. One of the aspects of this complex of problems is the possibility of deriving from the New Testament some core or germ or axis which was peculiarly normative for all subsequent expressions of the Gospel. Following this pursuit, Archibald Hunter and most recently Claude H. Thompson have accepted C. H. Dodd's recovery of the apostolic preaching, the kerygma, as the original and normative gospel formulation. Thompson writes, "There seems to be an irreducible core of the New Testament preaching which may neither be ignored nor diminished lest the Christian message be destroyed. Indeed, the total New Testament is but the elaboration and explication of this kerygma."¹ This was the character of Dodd's position also. Without diminishing the importance of Dodd's recovery, the assertion that the kerygma is the core of the New Testament has come under severe fire. Robinson has made a frontal attack on the kerygmatic character of Mark, and Conzelmann has indicated quite different motives for Luke. The implications of the foregoing study likewise challenge this position, for the Apostolic setting was broadly kerygmatic, and the other three settings apparently were not in the least conformed to it. Furthermore, since the predominant note of our discoveries was the great variations in expressing the gospel even where there

was a basic agreement, it seems highly unlikely that the gospel was in a formal, propositional form. Such would hardly allow for the great divergencies of expression. Therefore, another alternative than the kerygma seems necessary.

Samuel Laeuchli has recently been analyzing the gnostic language of the post-apostolic age seeking to discover why, although it shared the Biblical vocabulary, it is clearly not Biblical in content. He suggests that the essential character of the faith is not vocabulary but a language-grammar, idioms and all. Thus he writes, "The climatic event of salvation is reflected in the canon of the New Testament. The event and its document belong together . . . Because of this inter-relationship there can no longer be Christian language apart from the canon."² "The believer in Jesus Christ uses the words, idioms and imagery of the Bible . . . They represent the root of his faith, since they belong to God's unique revelation to us."³ Laeuchli is concerned with the third century rather than the first and so is not specifically discussing our problem. However, if we would take his suggestion and apply it to the First Century, we would be saying that the core of the gospel was a language. Not only does the previous study fail to indicate any particular language continuity, but also as Bultmann warns about Dodd, such a position as this is coming perilously close to making the gospel into dogma.

Rather than the germ or core of the gospel being kerygma or language, our study has indicated that it was something which allowed for and indeed may have created far more freedom of expression than these could. What might this be? A suggestion which seems to hold promise is "revelation", i.e. revelation is the germ of the gospel. Clearly we are not speaking of revelation as a propositional statement of some specific content, nor yet of some mystic, content-

¹ Thompson, C. H., *Theology of the Kerygma*, 1962, pp. 1 & 2.

² Laeuchli, S., *The Language of Faith*, 1962, p. 234.

³ P. 238.

less experience. The former could not provide for the freedom and the latter could not provide for the genuine continuity of basic content. However, if revelation is defined somewhat more with Paul Minear¹ as God moving into our world through Christ's death; the result being not information of the world but piercing self-knowledge which brings repentance, service and obedience; the content of this transforming gift being fellowship, i.e., participation with God and each other, then we find that a shared "revelation" could well result in the sort of dynamic situation which would give rise to widely differing expressions of the "good news," all sharing a similar basic content.

The study of the varied settings to the gospel in the New Testament left suggestions that seem to strengthen the above alternative. That is, we discovered that the New Testament writers insisted that the revelatory-redemptive occurrence took place in the midst of time, in history. However, said act was also unique in that it was not shaped solely or even primarily by that temporal context. It was an act like all others in history except that God was uniquely involved in this one. It was this involvement alone which made it redemptive and revelatory. From these tentative suggestions, let us attempt to draw out a fuller understanding of the nature of this kind of "revelation."

We may illustrate this concept of revelation by turning to Genesis 1:1 and using it analogously. Here we see that there was existing a formless, meaningless chaos. On this chaos of undisciplined experience, God impressed his will or his purpose. In so doing, it was necessary that some of the chaos be rearranged, changed and altered. Thus there was creation. Furthermore, that which was created was not only "good"; since it was not simply the re-

sult of divine purpose but bore the impress of divine purpose, the creation was also a revelation of the divine purpose. The creation was a bridge by which men could now understand God. Through it they could see God's purpose. By analogy from this to a concept of revelation, there exists a meaningless, undifferentiated chaos of natural and human happenings, an undisciplined flux of time. This chaos will remain meaningless until some meaning is impressed on it by some outside agent. God chooses to impress his purpose on this flux. In so doing, the chaos is rearranged and changed somewhat. Thus sensibility comes upon time and history is created. That which is created by God in the midst of time is not only "good"; since it bears the impress of divine purpose, it is the revelation of that purpose. The meaningful event is a bridge by which men can understand God's purpose.

Thus a revelatory event may be defined as the result of the dynamic conjunction of the flux of time and God's purpose. The event is revelatory because it participates in God's purpose. Although this definition seems to resemble Paul Tillich's interpretation of symbol, there is a distinction. As far as I understand Tillich, he would not maintain that the reality must participate in that which symbolizes it.² We are affirming exactly this relationship. That is, the purpose is instrumental to the event. The event is what it is precisely because purpose has shaped it that way. If the purpose had not acted within the flux of time, the event would not only fail to be a revelation; it would also fail to be what it is; it would be something quite different.

In defining a revelatory event as the result of the dynamic, instrumental conjunction of Divine purpose and flux of time, we are taking exception to Glen Rose's definition, "an event is an actual happening plus the interpretation of the

¹ Minear, P. S., "Revelation and the Knowledge of the Church," the Dudleian Lecture at Harvard University, 1953-1954, pp 27-35.

² Tillich, Paul, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 42.

happening by an exterior factor." Even though Rose adds that "this interpretation is now linked with the actual occurrence that we can no longer separate the two sides of the coin,"¹ it seems that he is allowing the possibility of drawing a line between the happening and the interpretation, between the word and the action. This would allow us to discuss either separately. Even more crucially, it seems to imply that the interpretation may be propositional, and that it might be possible to distill or to filter out interpretation from event. The study of the varied settings of the gospel in the New Testament has not given support to this possibility. On the other hand, the study has seemed to call for an interpretation which presents revelation as less conceptual and verbal while still having a genuine and apprehendable content.

What is necessary for apprehension of revelation? In a sense, it is just what is necessary for the apprehension of any event. That is, meaning must be impressed upon the flux if it is to be apprehended at all. Without some meaning which orders the flux and the undisciplined chaos, apprehension is not possible; there can be only confusion. The meaning which is impressed on the happenings may have its source in the apprehender; that is, it may be supplied by him in order to make the flux significant. On the other hand, some other source could supply the meaning which would make the flux significant, if the apprehender wished to accept it instead of his own. Finally, the transcendent God might act to impress His purpose upon the flux and thus give it meaning. In this case, the apprehender would find the happening to be significant only as he accepted God's work in place of his own or others.

Thus the faith relationship lies at the heart of apprehending an event as reve-

lation. Faith, however, is not simply the acceptance of revelation; that is, the man of faith does not just receive the event as divinely determined and therefore revelatory of God's purpose. Rather faith is the gift of God which allows a man to deny himself (i.e. the meaning he would impress on the flux) and hence be open to the shaping of God. To clarify this a bit, consider the nature of any non-Christian faith. Such faith is not simply seeing the flux as different nor as baffling nor is it failing to see anything at all. It is impressing on the flux some human meaning rather than accepting the event as God has shaped it. Such faith is neither error nor poor vision; it is rebellion. It rejects God's impression and plays God, impressing a lie onto and over the action of God. It attempts to coerce the event into becoming something which has never really existed.

Since revelation is entirely event rather than partly conceptual, it follows that it can be apprehended only in active participation in the event. However, this does not mean mysticism. Rather, since God's purposive action is not restricted to one point in the flux nor does it change in character but is both contemporaneously active and the result of a single purpose, the man of faith may participate in (and thus apprehend) any past event by participating in its contemporary expression. An example of this would be the relationship between the Christ event and the church. Although these events occur at different points in the flux of time, the formative purpose is one; therefore participation in one is participation in the other.

Finally we turn to the question: if the "core" of the gospel is revelation, and if revelation is non-verbal event which is apprehended only by participation in it, is it possible to give verbal-conceptual expression to the revelation; or, what is the relationship between the "core" of the gospel and the verbal-conceptual expression of the gospel? Inasmuch as the revelatory event is not fully

¹ Rose, Glen, article entitled "The Biblical Idea of Revelation," in *Encounter*, volume 21, number 2, pp 206-207.

apprehended by any participation in it, and inasmuch as any verbalization of the apprehension of an event is not fully expressive of the apprehension, it is clear that the verbalization-conceptualization is not necessarily identical with the event: i.e. the expression of the Gospel is not the equivalent of the "core" of the Gospel. The revelatory event will transcend all verbal-conceptual expressions of it.

Therefore, the one who proclaims the Gospel must choose between vocabularies, languages, concepts and world-views which are inherently inadequate. His choice is motivated by two major factors: 1) he will choose that which most adequately communicates with those persons to whom he wishes to proclaim the Gospel. 2) He will choose that which he had discovered to be peculiarly analogous or metaphorical to bear the "core" of the gospel. F. W. Dillistone speaks of this "adoption of certain language forms" as an "inverbalization which is not unrelated to already existing forms and yet which in some way transforms them through the Divine ingression."¹

We may now focus our attention on the second of the two contemporary issues, that of syncretism and apologetic. Much of their discussion centers on the possibility of reductionism — can the Gospel be reduced to a core? If this is taken to mean a core in a propositional form, our study would indicate that this is not legitimate. The core, if we can even speak of it as such, is essentially and unavoidably linked with event. And

we have even maintained that the interpretation which makes the event a revelation should not be seen as an explanatory statement offered by God but as his creative activity impressed upon the chaos. Therefore, if any attempt to derive a core of the gospel seeks to be responsible to the New Testament, it should proceed in the direction of content which is non-propositional, dynamic and "event" related.

Finally we inquire of the legitimacy of syncretism. If this means compromising the gospel with that foreign to the gospel, we find very little of this within the New Testament. Where it does occur, for example, perhaps in matters of high christology, of the holy spirit, there seems to be a clear effort to refrain from any wholesale, uncritical borrowing or from any excesses which significantly alter the basic gospel-faith (such as happened in later Gnosticism).

If, on the other hand, we are speaking of borrowing forms and vocabulary from other cultures and thought patterns in an attempt to communicate the Gospel effectively to those same people, then the example of the New Testament writers not only allows this possibility but indeed makes it necessary. Furthermore, following the example of the New Testament writers we would not feel bound either to the language or the vocabulary or the many world views of the New Testament itself. There is one thing only to which the apologist is bound: to the revelation. Therefore, for effective and valid Christian apologetics it is first necessary to recover the dynamic understanding of revelation as event.

¹ F. W. Dillistone in *The Communication of the Gospel in New Testament Times*, London, 1961, p. 90.

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