

A Question of Methodology

Attempts to define basic biblical terms often founder on the rocks of a faulty method. For example, many commentators answer the question, What is the Gospel? by quoting texts from Paul's epistles. First Corinthians 15:1-3 is a favorite passage, where certainly Paul does review an important part of the teaching he had transmitted to his converts. However, an appeal to Paul's letters as primary evidence for the content of the foundation of Christian teaching overlooks two major considerations. Firstly, as William Sanday and Arthur Headlam recognized in their commentary on Romans, "Paul is not expounding the Christian religion, he is writing to Christians. A knowledge [of the Christian system] is presupposed."¹ Secondly, the Gospel was first preached by Jesus (Heb. 2:3), a fact often forgotten by expositors who proceed to Paul's writings as though the Gospel began with his ministry to Gentiles. This technique gives rise to an alarming theory of discontinuity between the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus and the preaching of Paul. In Dispensationalist circles the break is almost absolute: Jesus proclaimed the Gospel of the Kingdom to Jews, while Paul introduced the Gospel of grace for Gentiles.²

The method proposed by the Bible itself is to root the Gospel in the preaching of the historical Jesus. Reporting on the earliest evangelism, Luke deliberately identifies the pre- and post-resurrection Kerygmas by labeling them both "the Gospel about the Kingdom of God." It was the Gospel about the Kingdom of God which Jesus saw as the *raison d'être* of His whole ministry (Luke 4:43), a text which one would expect to find constantly in the limelight as opening up Jesus' whole mind. It was the Gospel of the Kingdom of God which the twelve went out to proclaim under Jesus' supervision (Luke 9:2). This activity Luke recognizes simply as "preaching the Gospel" (Luke 9:6), a strikingly important fact when we remember that the Gospel did not at this stage contain a word about Jesus' death and resurrection. In Acts we have primary evidence of

the same Message brought to potential converts. It was still "the Gospel about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12; cp. 28:23, 31).

Biblical revelation builds on itself. Thus a proper method demands that we seek further clarification of the Gospel in the Hebrew Scriptures, remembering that the Gospel was proclaimed in advance to Abraham (Gal. 3:8), in other words, that the promises were spoken to him (Gal. 3:16), promises which Jesus came to confirm (Rom. 15:9). Tracing the Gospel to the divine dealings with Abraham will ensure that we do not omit the essential "taken-for-granted" which the New Testament has imported from the heritage of Israel. On this point James Dunn gives us reason to reflect on how sound our traditional methods have been. His remarks have to do with how well we read Paul, but they may apply equally to our understanding of any part of the New Testament. He says: "Since most of Christian history and scholarship, regrettably, has been unsympathetic to the self-understanding [of the Jews and Judaism], a proper appreciation of Paul in his interaction with that self-understanding has been virtually impossible."³

Nothing is more Jewish, but not for that reason any less Christian, than the origin of the Gospel in the Covenant made with Abraham. The promises given to him include a permanent grant of land, distinguished progeny, and blessing for himself and all nations. These are the all-too-often forgotten elements of the Christian Gospel. They are discarded in much preaching for the simple reason that essential definitions are derived first from Paul, without taking into consideration the foundation on which he is building. That foundation is firstly his own previous "first-level" instruction given to the churches when he planted them; secondly, his assumption that he is a faithful exponent of Jesus' Gospel about the Kingdom, as both he (Acts 20:25) and Luke (Acts 19:8, 28:23, 31) assert. Faith, Paul insists, comes from intelligent response to the Messiah's message (Rom. 10:17). Thirdly, Paul goes to great lengths to define the Gospel in terms of the promises made to Abraham (Rom. 4; Gal. 3; 4). Central to that promise is that Abraham was to become "heir of the world" (Rom. 4:13) and that his spiritual children, both Jews and Gentiles, now share the same prospect in Christ (Gal. 3:29). The land promise which almost never features in current expositions of the Gospel, remains for Jesus and the New Testament of critical significance. Jesus imports the whole notion of the covenant with Abraham by repeating the promise that

¹*International Critical Commentary on Romans*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1905, li.

²See *Ungers Bible Dictionary*, art. "Gospel," but note the *equation* of the two terms in Acts 20:24, 25.

³*Word Bible Commentary, Romans 9-16*, Dallas: Word Books, 1988, xv.

“the meek will inherit the earth,” and the writer to the Hebrews points out that Abraham lived as a stranger in the “land of the promise” (i. e., Canaan), without ever taking possession of that inheritance (Heb. 11:8, 9, 13, 39; cp. Acts 7:5).

The Gospel is best defined by starting in the Old Testament in order to ensure that vital presuppositions arising from the covenant with Abraham are not lost. Next in order of priority come the definitions of the Gospel as it was preached to unbelievers, before and after the resurrection. Thirdly, confirmation may be sought in the allusions of Paul to his initial preaching. A method which reverses this order runs the risk of forgetting the Hebrew environment of the Christian faith, misunderstanding Paul and ignoring Jesus, whose Gospel was centered on the Abrahamic promise of the Kingdom of God and inheriting the land/earth (Matt. 5:5).

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