

EDITORIAL

From Dogma to Dogma

Evangelicalism is largely unaware of the extent of its own commitment to dogma imposed by the Reformation. G.F. Moore put his finger on this unrecognized problem when he wrote: “Luther created by a dogmatic criterion a canon of the gospel within the canon of the books.”¹ The issue, then, is nothing less than the content of the Gospel; and the Gospel provides the definition of an entire system of faith. A systematic misunderstanding of the Gospel of Jesus was set in motion when Luther declared:

Those Apostles who treat oftenest and highest of how faith alone justifies are the best evangelists. Therefore St. Paul’s epistles are more a Gospel than Matthew, Mark and Luke. For the latter do not set down much more than the works and miracles of Christ; but the grace which we receive through Christ no one so boldly extols as St. Paul, especially in his letter to the Romans.

There is more. John’s Gospel, Paul’s letters and 1 Peter are, according to Luther, “the kernel and marrow of all books,” while James is a “mere letter of straw, for there is nothing evangelical about it.”

G. F. Moore observes:

It is clear that the infallibility of Scripture has here, in fact if not in admission, followed the infallibility of the Popes and councils, for Scripture itself has to submit to be judged by the ultimate criterion of its accord with Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith.

Luther’s arbitrary selection of his personal favorites, in other words the books in which he thought his own concept of justification/salvation/gospel could be grounded, is nothing less than a theological disaster. The principal casualty in the Lutheran dogma and canon within the canon was Jesus himself. The cause of Christ was struck a tremendous blow when Luther relegated the accounts of the Gospel preaching and teaching of Jesus to the position of “also-rans.” Matthew, Mark and Luke give us in fact a triple

¹ Moore, *History of Religions*, Scribners, 1920, 320.

witness to the content of the Gospel as Jesus preached it. But Luther, who failed to define the Gospel with the synoptics as “the Gospel of the Kingdom,” dismisses the New Testament’s opening books as providing “not much more than the works and miracles of Christ.”

Luther bequeathed to posterity his very subjective and distorted view of the Gospel. His method is reflected in a thousand evangelical tracts offering salvation, in which Gospel data from the words of Jesus in Matthew, Mark and Luke is conspicuously absent. An objective study of the New Testament yields a clear result: The Gospel began to be preached by Jesus himself (Heb. 2:3). The measure of true Christianity is its conformity to the teaching/words of Jesus (1 Tim. 6:3; 2 John 9). The Gospel must be defined from its source in the Gospel ministry of Jesus himself. It is perilous to proceed to Paul (who is liable to misunderstanding by the unskilled — 2 Peter 3:16) and make Paul an innovator of the Gospel rather than the servant and follower of the master Gospel preacher, Jesus.

The Lutheran dogma is reflected in the amazing misunderstanding expressed by C. S. Lewis. The Gospels, he says,

are not “the Gospel,” the statement of Christian belief The epistles are more primitive and more central than the Gospels — though not of course than the great events which the Gospels recount. God’s Act (the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection) comes first: the earliest theological analysis of it comes in the epistles: then when the generation which had heard the Lord was dying out, the Gospels were composed to provide the believers a record of the great Act and some of the Lord’s sayings.²

This whole argument stands the truth of Christianity on its head. It was Jesus who came preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom (Luke 4:43, etc.), founding the Christian faith on his own Gospel preaching as well as on his subsequent death and resurrection. For 25 chapters in the synoptic Gospels, Jesus, the Twelve and Seventy, as well as others, constantly proclaim *the* Gospel, and it is concerned not primarily with the person of Jesus, nor with his death and resurrection, but with the fact of the coming Kingdom and how it can be entered when it comes. The death and resurrection of Jesus are later added to the content of the Gospel as they occurred. But not for a moment is the substratum of Kingdom content laid by Jesus removed from the Gospel.

² Introduction to J.B. Phillips’ *Letters to Young Churches*, Fontana Books, 9, 10.

Evangelicalism, however has reduced the Gospel to the death and resurrection of Jesus, thus bypassing the Gospel *preaching* of Jesus!

Paul would have been amazed to find that his epistles had been misused to promote a Gospel which cuts the saving message in half, by a subtraction of the Gospel about the Kingdom as Jesus preached it and commanded it to be preached everywhere until his return to set up the Kingdom at the end of the age (Matt. 28:19, 20).

Such a twisting of Paul, at the expense of Jesus' patent concern to lay the foundation of the faith with his own Gospel, has occurred. Paul contradicts Luther when he describes his own mission, the proclamation of the Gospel of grace, as exactly the same as the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom (Acts 20:24, 25). Luke has painstakingly and repeatedly documented the continuity of Paul's Gospel with that of Jesus. Evangelicals seem quite unaware that Luther has not done them a service by passing on a disparaging view of Matthew, Mark and Luke. For it is in these precious documents that we see the model of the preaching of the Kingdom as Gospel, by the historical and very Jewish Messiah. It was to the continuation of the preaching of that Gospel, and no other, either by addition or subtraction, that Paul committed his own tireless ministry. Luke records as his final portrait of Paul that "he welcomed the people and solemnly witnessed to the Kingdom of God and to Jesus" (Acts 28:31).

James Dunn's excellent commentary on Acts should lead to a fundamental revision of the content of the current evangelical gospel. Luke's whole point is missed unless we recognize the continuity of the one and only Gospel of the Kingdom as preached by Jesus. On Acts 1:3 he remarks:

The subject of the risen Jesus' teaching during the forty days is given as the "Kingdom of God" . . . This is a further striking point of continuity between the Gospel and Acts. If any phrase characterizes Jesus' teaching during his ministry after Jordan, it is "the Kingdom of God" (Luke 4:43; 6:20; 7:28; 8:1, 10; 9:2, 11, etc.). And the same phrase occurs sufficiently regularly in Acts as the theme of the expanding mission, not least of the hero of the second half of Acts (Paul), to be more than accidental (8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23). Particularly noticeable is its appearance in the very last verse of Acts (28:31): the continuity of the gospel theme runs not just through Acts but beyond into the phase following the closure of Acts.³

³ *The Acts of the Apostles*, Trinity Press International, 1996, 7.

The Gospel which fell from the lips of Jesus needs to be reinstated as the essential invitation to salvation. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by means of the Messiah's word (Rom. 10:17).