

## *When is a Gospel Not a Gospel?*<sup>1</sup>

**F.F. Bruce**

Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis in the  
University of Manchester

[p.319]

We shall approach this question in two ways, first with reference to written records which claim the designation "Gospel" and then with reference to the oral gospel which lies behind the written Gospel.

We talk familiarly about the four Gospels, the apocryphal Gospels, and so forth, using the word "Gospels" quite freely in the plural. But this usage would not have been understood in the Church of apostolic days—of course not, you say, because the four Gospels did not come into being until the end of the apostolic age. True, but this usage would not have been understood for nearly a century after the apostolic age. The first occurrences of the word "Gospels in the plural, in this sense, come (so far as we know) in the last quarter of the second century—in Claudius Apollinaris, Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus and the Muratorian Canon.<sup>2</sup> Clement speaks of "the four Gospels which have been handed down to us";<sup>3</sup> Irenaeus, in his famous comparison of the fourfold Gospel to such axiomatic facts of life as the four quarters of the world and the four winds of heaven,<sup>4</sup> speaks not only of the "fourfold Gospel" (τετράμορφον τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) but also of "the Gospels" (τὰ εὐαγγέλια). Similarly the Muratorian Canon, while it calls Luke's record "the third book of the Gospel" (*tertium euangelii librum*), refers to John's as "the fourth of the Gospels" (*quartum euangeliorum*). From the way in which Irenaeus and the author of the Muratorian Canon oscillate between the collective singular and the

[p.320]

plural for the fourfold record, it may be inferred that the plural, "Gospels" was just coming into use.

Previously the singular alone was used, whether by Marcion for his single record (his recension of Luke's Gospel) or by the Catholic Church for its fourfold record (and sometimes, by extension, for the whole New Testament).<sup>5</sup> Later still, the Syriac Church continued to use the singular when it distinguished the *Ewangelyon da-Mehallete*, "the Gospel of the Mixed" (Tatian's Diatessaron) from the *Ewangelyon da-Mepharreshe*, "the Gospel of the Separated" (the four distinct writings).<sup>6</sup> There was only one εὐαγγέλιον—the gospel of Christ—although it might be narrated by several Evangelists. The overall caption for the fourfold record was

---

<sup>1</sup> A lecture delivered in the Library series of public lectures.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek evidence is now conveniently available in *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, edited by G. W. H. Lampe, fasc. 2 (1962), s.v. εὐαγγέλιον.

<sup>3</sup> *Strom.* iii. 13. 238. 27.

<sup>4</sup> *Haer.* iii. 11. 8.

<sup>5</sup> So Irenaeus and Origen, quoted in Lampe, *loc. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> The Syriac version of Eusebius (*HE*, iv. 29. 6) glosses τὸ Διὰ τεσσάρων, with *da-mehallete*; *ewangelyon da-mepharreshe* appears in the title of the Curetonian Old Syriac Gospels, the colophon of the Sinitic Old Syriac Gospels, the Canons of Rabbula, etc.

*EYANGELION*; the four writings included under it were further particularized as *κατὰ Μαθθαίου*, *κατὰ Μάρκον* and so on. In other words, the early Christians spoke and thought of the one and only gospel of Christ, variously recorded by Matthew, Mark and the rest. So also, outside the canonical four, the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*, for example, was the same gospel of Christ, in the form in which it was recorded among the "Hebrews".

The four New Testament Gospels are anonymous. Whether the names which have been traditionally attached to them from the second century onwards are historically justified or not, the authors' names are not given in the documents themselves, neither by way of preface nor by way of colophon. There are, no doubt, excellent reasons for believing (say) that Luke the physician, Paul's friend and fellow-traveller, was indeed the author of the Third Gospel; but there is no claim, direct or indirect, to such authorship in the Third Gospel itself.

Nor does any of the four canonical Gospels claim to be a "Gospel". The one that comes nearest to doing so is Mark's, which begins with the words: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ..."—but it is not certain whether this is intended to be a title for the whole book or simply a description

[p.321]

of the ministry of John the Baptist, which serves the Evangelist as a prologue to the ministry of Jesus. It is remarkable, when one comes to think of it, that none of the records which are in closest touch with the Jesus of history and the apostolic preaching either calls itself a "Gospel" or claims the authority of an apostle's name; whereas documents of the second century and later, whose contact with the saving events is tenuous at best, call themselves "Gospels" and claim to be the reminiscences of apostles or of other well-known figures in the gospel story.

We need not dwell on those Gospels which were designed to satisfy general curiosity about the infancy and youth of Jesus or his three days in the tomb. Nor need we deal with those which retold the story of Jesus, and especially the passion narrative, from a docetic point of view. Such, for example, was the Gospel of Peter, which we know to have been current in Syria towards the end of the second century. It tells how Jesus on the cross "was silent, as one who felt no pain" except when he uttered the cry of dereliction, which in this document is given as "My power, my power, why hast thou left me?"—a token of the docetic or Cerinthian teaching that the divine power which descended on the man Jesus earlier (at his baptism) left him before his death.<sup>7</sup>

More important for our purpose are some second-century and later works which claim to present teaching given by Jesus to his disciples, more particularly after his release from mortal body, when he had returned to the spiritual realm of light to which he belonged. One of the best-known of these works is the Coptic treatise called *Pistis Sophia*, in which Jesus, after spending eleven years with his disciples following his resurrection, teaching them things which he had not spoken of during his earlier ministry, ascended to heaven, but descended again, clad in unapproachable light, in order to reveal to them the fullness of truth as they had

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Euseb. *HE*, vi. 12. 2 ff.; H. B. Swete (ed.), *The Akhmîm Fragment of the Apocryphal Gospel of St. Peter* (1893).

not received it hitherto. More recently the publication of the *Secret Doctrine of John*<sup>8</sup> has introduced us to

[p.322]

another document of roughly similar character, in which John the apostle tells how the exalted Christ appeared to him in unearthly light, as the Gnostic Redeemer, and gave him a revelation about the origin of the world, of man and of evil, and about the ultimate destiny of souls.

These Gnostic works, however, are not called Gospels, although they do not differ so greatly from other Gnostic works which do bear the designation "Gospel".<sup>9</sup> Our knowledge of these has been very substantially increased by the discovery of the Gnostic library of Chenoboskion (popularly known as the Nag Hammadi papyri).<sup>10</sup>

The first of the Chenoboskion documents to be published, the Valentinian *Gospel of Truth*, is not a Gnostic Gospel; indeed it does not claim to be a Gospel at all. Its *subject* is the gospel; it consists of a series of meditations on the "true gospel" (that is, the gospel of Christ) coming perhaps from Valentinus himself.<sup>11</sup> Valentinus spent most of his active life on the frontier between "orthodoxy" and "heterodoxy" (or rather the positions which later came to be described by these terms); at one time there was a possibility of his election to the papacy. His followers took hold of certain elements in his speculative meditations on the gospel and developed them in a distinctly Gnostic form.

The Chenoboskion documents which are called in their colophons the *Gospel according to Philip* and the *Gospel according to Thomas* are in a different case from the *Gospel of Truth*. Here we have works which do claim to belong to the literary category "Gospel".

[p.323]

The *Gospel according to Philip* is an anthology of 127 *obiter dicta* and meditations reflecting the Valentinian outlook. Some of these are ascribed to Jesus; others are based on canonical sayings of his without his being expressly named; some are reminiscent of New Testament passages outside the four Gospels.<sup>12</sup> The *Gospel according to Thomas* is a compilation of some 114 sayings ascribed to Jesus, about half of which bear a close resemblance to recorded sayings of his in the canonical Gospels. The compilation is introduced by the words: "These are the secret sayings which Jesus the Living One spoke and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down." The title "Jesus the Living One" may refer to Jesus' resumption of new life after his resurrection; as for the description of the sayings as "secret", since there is nothing secret

---

<sup>8</sup> The *editio princeps* was published by Walter Till in 1955 on the basis of the Berlin Coptic Papyrus 8502. It has also been identified among the Chenoboskion documents. For an English translation see R. M. Grant (ed.), *Gnosticism: An Anthology* (1961), pp. 69 ff.

<sup>9</sup> According to O. A. Piper, "the book of Pistis Sophia, chapters 1-81, is a gospel; it presents the joyful message of man's salvation"; but in it "the gnostic ideas supersede the gospel of the primitive church (*Interpretation*, xvi [1962], pp. 412 f., in an article "Change of Perspective", pp. 402 ff.).

<sup>10</sup> So called evidently because it was in the town of Nag Hammadi that the discovery was first reported. Nag Hammadi is on the west bank of the Nile, c. 25 miles north of Luxor; Chenoboskion lay 5 miles downstream, on the east bank.

<sup>11</sup> See F. L. Cross (ed.), *The Jung Codex* (1955); K. Grobel, *The Gospel of Truth* (1960).

<sup>12</sup> See R. McL. Wilson, *The Gospel of Philip* (1962).

about the sayings in themselves, the secrecy must lie in their esoteric interpretation, probably in accordance with the principles of Naassene Gnosticism.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of the language of the Colophons, these documents cannot be regarded as "Gospels" in the proper sense of the term. Even a collection of indubitably authenticated sayings of Jesus would not be a Gospel. For example, the document commonly envisaged as underlying the "Q" material in Matthew and Luke cannot, as ordinarily reconstructed, be called a Gospel, if only because it lacks a passion narrative. We may think of the "Q" source as patterned on the books of the Old Testament prophets, which give an account of the prophet's call, present his oracles in a certain amount of narrative framework, but never record his death.

It is true that Jesus himself preached the gospel to the poor before his death when he proclaimed the kingdom of God; but the kingdom which he proclaimed and the gospel which he preached could not become completely effective until his death and resurrection had taken place. Since then, the record of his passion and triumph has occupied the foremost place in the

[p.324]

gospel of Christ, because in these events his message of the kingdom was most clearly embodied. Paul was but repeating what he had received from those who were in Christ before him when he delivered to the people of Corinth "as of first importance" the good news of Christ's death, burial, and variously attested resurrection.<sup>14</sup> In the New Testament generally "the Kingdom of God is conceived as coming in the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and to proclaim these facts, in their proper setting, is to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom of God".<sup>15</sup> Since the death and resurrection of Christ, a Gospel without a passion narrative is a contradiction in terms.

Far from containing a passion narrative, the *Gospel of Thomas* has not even any room for those sayings of Jesus which make reference to his death. The good news which its compiler really wishes to commend is good news for the "solitary" member of a spiritual elite, assuring him that by the path of true knowledge he may escape from the fetters of his bodily existence and other material encumbrances and so ascend to the upper realm of light, the true home of his spirit.

## II

Let us now go back beyond the age of written Gospels to the earlier stage when Christian preaching was given exclusively by word of mouth, and ask again: When is a gospel not a gospel? We are, in fact, compelled to ask this question by the New Testament itself, especially by the Pauline epistles. It is Paul who charges certain people of whose words and actions he disapproved with preaching an alleged gospel which he did not recognize as a gospel at all.

"I am astonished", he writes to his Galatian converts, "that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel (ἕτερον

---

<sup>13</sup> See R.McL. Wilson, *Studies in the Gospel of Thomas* (1960); B. Gartner, *The Theology of the Gospel of Thomas* (1961); O. Cullmann, "The Gospel of Thomas and the Problem of the Age of the Tradition contained therein", *Interpretation*, xvi (1962), 418 ff. (translation of an article which appeared in *TLZ*, May 1960).

<sup>14</sup> 1 Cor. xv. 3 ff.

<sup>15</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (1944), p. 24.

εὐαγγέλιον)—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed."<sup>16</sup> He

[p.325]

uses similar language on a later occasion, when in irony he tells his Corinthian converts that, while they are very intolerant of him, their father in the faith, they are very tolerant of anyone who comes to them and "preaches another Jesus than the one we preached, or... a different gospel (εὐαγγέλιον ἕτερον) from the one you accepted".<sup>17</sup>

What, we may ask, in Paul's eyes was necessary to make a message the true gospel, and what kind of message did he dismiss as being no gospel at all?

In order to answer this question satisfactorily, or interpret these two Pauline quotations adequately, let us do something towards filling in the background.

In the New Testament the εὐαγγέλιον is (a) the proclamation by Jesus that the kingdom of God has drawn near; (b) the proclamation by the disciples that in Jesus the kingdom of God is fully manifested, that he by his humiliation and exaltation is set forth as Messiah, Lord; Son of God. The second phase of the εὐαγγέλιον arises inevitably out of the first; the passion and triumph of Jesus, which formed the basis of the apostolic preaching, crowned his ministry and embodied and confirmed all that he had taught about the kingdom of God.<sup>18</sup>

The background of the substantive εὐαγγέλιον and its related verb εὐαγγελίζομαι, as used in the New Testament, must be sought in the second part of the book of Isaiah—in Isaiah xl. 9, lii. 7, lx. 6 and lxi. 1.

The good news of Zion's liberation, celebrated in Isaiah xl. 9 ("O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion..."),<sup>19</sup> is interpreted in the New Testament as adumbrating the good news of a greater liberation, just as the voice of Isaiah xl. 3

[p.326]

calling for the preparation of a way across the desert for Yahweh to lead his exiles home is interpreted of another voice which, on the eve of the ministry of Jesus, called for repentance in preparation for the advent of the Coming One.<sup>20</sup> The words of Isaiah lii. 7 ("How beautiful

---

<sup>16</sup> Gal. i. 6-8.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Cor. xi. 4.

<sup>18</sup> "The New Testament has two patterns in which the good news is presented, namely the Kingdom type and the Resurrection type.... There is a difference in perspective rather than in substance.... The gnostic gospel has obviously developed from the latter type. But the perspective has changed..., the Christian Gnostic is not primarily interested in the saving significance which Christ has for him. He concerns himself with what Christ, or God in Christ, has done—but only inasmuch as such knowledge will enable him to discover the way by which he can ascend to the highest type of existence, which is union with God" (O. A. Piper, *Interpretation*, xvi [1962], 416 f.).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. also Isaiah lx. 6 (LXX), τὸ σωτήριον Κυρίου εὐαγγελιοῦνται.

<sup>20</sup> In Isaiah xl ff. it is Yahweh himself who is ultimately proclaimed in the good tidings: the herald is told to "say to the cities of Judah, Behold your God" (Isaiah xl. 9). So in the New Testament the bearers of the gospel summarize their message in words such as these: "what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord" (2

upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings...") are to the same effect as those of Isaiah xl. 9, and are applied by Paul in Romans x. 15 to the preachers of the gospel of Christ.

But more important for New Testament usage than Isaiah xl. 9 or lii. 7 is Isaiah lxi. 1, where an unnamed speaker (undoubtedly identified in the New Testament with the Servant of Yahweh of preceding chapters of Isaiah) introduces himself by saying: "The Spirit of the Lord Yahweh is upon me, because Yahweh has anointed me—*meshahani*, 'made me Messiah', if you like—to bring good tidings to the poor." Not only does Luke depict Jesus as reading this scripture in the Nazareth synagogue and applying it to himself,<sup>21</sup> but the earlier "Q" narrative of Jesus' reply to John the Baptist's message from prison records how he emphasized as the conclusive argument for his being indeed the Coming One of whom John had previously spoken the fact that "the poor have good news preached to them."<sup>22</sup>

The more immediate background to Paul's words about a gospel which is not a gospel must, however, be sought in his own writings. What was the gospel which he recognized as the true gospel—to which he referred as "my gospel"?

The one occurrence of the phrase "my gospel" which is universally recognized as authentically Paul's is in Romans ii. 16, where he refers to "the day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus". Here at any rate there is nothing to distinguish Paul's gospel from any other form

[p.327]

of the apostolic gospel. That Jesus is the divinely appointed judge of the living and the dead is good pre-Pauline doctrine;<sup>23</sup> it is bound up, of course, with the identification of Jesus with the "one like a son of man" in Daniel vii. 13—an identification which plays no very prominent part in Paul's distinctive Christology.

The two other references to "my gospel" in the Pauline corpus come in Romans xvi. 25 and 2 Timothy ii. 8. The latter will not hinder us long: "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David, according to my gospel is plainly a summary of primitive Christian belief very similar to that which Paul incorporates in the opening salutation of the Epistle to the Romans. Whatever view be taken of the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles, this statement of faith is common to Paul and the other early preachers of the gospel and contains nothing distinctively Pauline. The remaining occurrence of "my gospel" belongs to the doxology at the end of Romans—a paragraph which presents a variety of textual problems, and which Harnack took to be, in its present form, a Catholicizing reworking of a Marcionite

---

Cor. iv. 5). This comes close to the Hellenistic usage of the word, which has to do with "the God-Emperor who is venerated in the cult and the εὐαγγέλιον which proclaims him" (J. Schniewind, *Euangelion* ii [1931], p. 183).

<sup>21</sup> Luke iv. 17 ff.

<sup>22</sup> Luke vii. 22; Matt. xi. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Acts x. 42. In this paper I have not enlarged on the evidence of Acts for our subject, or for the relations existing between Paul and the Twelve; I have done so elsewhere (e.g. in *The Acts of the Apostles*<sup>2</sup> [1952], pp. 18 ff., 34 ff., *et passim*), and still hold, in particular, that the speeches ascribed to Peter and Paul in Acts ii—xiii are not free compositions by the historian but are based upon trustworthy sources, preserve reminiscences of the earliest apostolic preaching, and so present prima facie confirmation of Paul's statement that he and the Twelve preached the same kerygma (cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, pp. 17 ff.; *History and the Gospel* [1938], p. 73).

epilogue, composed perhaps by followers of Marcion to round off the epistle which their master had so ruthlessly curtailed at xiv. 23.<sup>24</sup> However that may be (and I am quite sceptical about Harnack's theory), "my gospel here embraces Christ's power to make his people's standing sure, together with "the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about obedience to

[p.328]

the faith". If this is not Pauline, it does not call for our present consideration; but if it is indeed Pauline, there is nothing in it which goes beyond the gospel logion: "Blessed are the eyes which see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."<sup>25</sup> The "mystery" in the doxology of Romans is more general than that of Colossians and Ephesians, which has to do with the incorporation of Gentile believers on an equal footing with Jewish believers as fellow-members of the body of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

A fuller summary of Paul's gospel is provided in 1 Corinthians xv. 1 ff. Since the New Testament epistles were written to people who had heard and accepted the gospel, they need not be expected to contain information which the readers already possessed. Occasionally, however, it was necessary to remind the readers of what they already knew; and it was necessary on this occasion to remind the Corinthian Christians of the elements of the gospel which was preached to them when their city was evangelized for the first time. Some members of the church of Corinth rejected the doctrine of the resurrection of the body (preferring, no doubt, the respectable Greek doctrine of the immortality of the soul),<sup>27</sup> and were thus unwittingly undermining the good news on which their salvation depended. Paul therefore reminded them of the terms in which they first heard him preach the gospel. "I delivered to you as of first importance", he wrote, "what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles."<sup>28</sup> Paul then goes on to tell how, late in the day,<sup>29</sup> he himself saw the risen

[p.329]

Christ; and he concludes this summary of testimony to the resurrection with the words: "Whether then it was I or they [the Twelve or James], so we preach and so you believed."<sup>30</sup>

Apart from the account of Paul's own experience, this is a summary of early Christian tradition—something that Paul "received" and which in turn he handed on to his Converts.

---

<sup>24</sup> Cf. A. Hamack, *Sitzungsbericht der preuss. Akad. der Wissenschaften*, phil.- hist. K1., 1919, pp. 531 ff.; reprinted in *Studien zur Geschichte des Neuen Testaments and der Alten Kirche* (1931), pp. 184 ff.

<sup>25</sup> Luke x. 23 f.; cf. Matt. xiii. 16f.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Col. i. 25 ff.; Eph. iii. 2 ff.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. T. W. Manson, *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles* (1962), p. 207.

<sup>28</sup> 1 Cor. xv. 3-7.

<sup>29</sup> ὡσπερὲι τῷ ἐκτρόματι, which may reflect his opponents' dismissal of him as a mere "abortion" of an apostle.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Cor. xv. 11.

These basic affirmations—Christ's death, his burial, his resurrection on the third day, and his appearance to several of his disciples (as well as to one, his brother James, who had not been previously numbered among them)—were evidently common ground to Paul and all the apostles.

Where and when did Paul "receive" all this? His vision of the risen Christ and his call to be an apostle were, he asserted, matters of direct divine revelation.<sup>31</sup> But the saving events themselves, the narrative of what Jesus said and did "on the night when he was delivered up",<sup>32</sup> with its sequel on the cross, in the tomb and on the resurrection morning—these were elements of that primitive tradition, originating with our Lord and vested with his authority, which Paul "received" just as his converts later "received" it from him.

It was pointed out many years ago by Harnack<sup>33</sup> and B. W. Bacon<sup>34</sup> that the summary of resurrection appearances in 1 Corinthians xv. 5 ff. (excluding that to Paul himself) falls into two series: (a) to Peter, to the Twelve, to over 500 brethren at once; (b) to James, to all the apostles. Each of these series goes back in all probability to the testimony of the man whose name introduces it. That is to say, the men from whom Paul received this information were Peter and James.<sup>35</sup>

As it happens, Paul in another autobiographical passage in his letters supplies the only feasible answer to the question of

[p.330]

when he acquired this information from Peter and James. It must have been during the fortnight that he spent with Peter when he visited Jerusalem in the third year after his conversion.<sup>36</sup> We may recall C. H. Dodd's remark with regard to this visit: "we may presume they did not spend all the time talking about the weather."<sup>37</sup> And it is with reference to this fortnight's stay with Peter that Paul says: "I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother."<sup>38</sup> Then, because of the importance that he attached to his limited opportunities during these two weeks, he adds: "In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!"<sup>39</sup>

So then, on the first visit that Paul paid to Jerusalem after his conversion he saw Peter and James, and none of the other apostles. Is it so surprising that his information about appearances of the risen Christ to others than himself should be the information which could best be given by Peter and James?

---

<sup>31</sup> Gal. i. 1, 15 f.

<sup>32</sup> 1 Cor. xi. 23.

<sup>33</sup> *Sitzungsbericht der preuss. Akad. der Wissenschaften*, phil.-hist. Kl., 1922, pp. 62 ff.

<sup>34</sup> *The Apostolic Message* (1925), pp. 132 ff.; *The Story of Jesus* (1928), pp. 304 ff.

<sup>35</sup> Bacon (*The Apostolic Message*, pp. 132 ff.) sees behind the two series of appearances in 1 Cor. xv. 5 ff. two traditions—a Petrine or Galilaean one, and a Jacobean or Jerusalem one (which he recognizes also in the Gospel according to the Hebrews). If he is right, they must be traditions of equal primitiveness for Paul to have received them both c. A.D. 35.

<sup>36</sup> Gal. i. 18 ff.

<sup>37</sup> *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, p. 16.

<sup>38</sup> Gal. i. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Gal. i. 20.



Paul's account of the next visit that he paid to Jerusalem contains further material relevant to our quest. On that occasion he and Barnabas went up together, accompanied by Titus, a Gentile Christian.<sup>40</sup> Whatever the main purpose of the visit may have been—my own inclination is to identify it with the famine-relief visit from Antioch recorded in Acts xi. 30—Paul took the opportunity of setting before the reputed "pillars" of the Jerusalem church, James, Peter and John (mentioned, significantly enough, in that order), the gospel as he understood and proclaimed it. No suggestion is made that it was a different gospel from that preached by the Jerusalem "pillars"; the point at issue was not the content of the message but the mutual acknowledgment of the respective spheres of activity of the two parties. The Jerusalem leaders acknowledged that Paul and Barnabas had been called to evangelize the Gentiles as surely as they themselves had been called to evangelize the Jews.

Paul adds, for the benefit of his Galatian readers, that the question of circumcision was not even raised, in spite of the presence of the uncircumcised Titus. It was not until a later date, and in different circumstances, that the idea of forcing

[p.331]

circumcision on Gentile believers was ventilated<sup>41</sup>—and that "because of false brethren secretly brought in", who are certainly not to be identified with the "pillars".

The implication is that the gospel as James, Peter and John understood it was in all essentials the same as the gospel which Paul and Barnabas preached. When, some time later, Paul at Antioch accused Peter of "play-acting" (ὕπόκρισις), the whole point of the accusation was that Peter was in basic agreement with Paul, although, for reasons of expediency, he was at the moment playing a part which did not correspond to his real convictions in the matter.

The person or persons who Came "from James"<sup>42</sup> and Caused Peter to act as he did were probably more concerned with practice than with doctrine; they (and no doubt James himself) were alarmed at the possible repercussions in Jerusalem if news came back that the leader of the apostles was freely enjoying table-fellowship with uncircumcised Gentiles. There were some quarters in Jerusalem, even in the Jerusalem church, where the fact that these Gentiles were uncircumcised would be of greater practical importance than the fact that they were Christians.

If, however, these visitors from James were the people mentioned in Acts xv. 1, it appears that, whatever their commission may have been, they exceeded its terms and took matters into their own hands by insisting that the Gentile Christians of Antioch ought to be circumcised—concerning which "we gave them no instructions", said the Jerusalem leaders.<sup>43</sup> It was evidently men of the same outlook who visited the churches of Galatia and urged the necessity of circumcision and law-keeping on the Christians there; and it was their adding as an essential ingredient of the gospel something that had nothing to do with it that made Paul stigmatize their teaching as "a different gospel" which was, in fact, no gospel at all.

---

<sup>40</sup> Gal. ii. 1 ff.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. T. W. Manson, *op. cit.* p. 176.

<sup>42</sup> On the variant readings τινᾶ... ἦλθεν for τινᾶς... ἦλθον in Gal. ii. 12, cf. T. W. Manson, *op. cit.* pp. 178 f.

<sup>43</sup> Acts xv. 24.

What about the "different gospel" which, at a later date, some visitors brought to Corinth?<sup>44</sup>  
Was it of exactly the same

[p.332]

kind? It certainly shared one subsidiary feature with the "different gospel" which was brought to the Galatian churches, in that its preachers minimized Paul's title to be recognized as an apostle. But that in itself did not make it a "different gospel". Its preachers were, however, pretty certainly members of the Circumcision party, although perhaps they did not press circumcision itself at Corinth—not to begin with, at least. (One gets the impression that an insistence on circumcision would not have gone down well in the Corinthian church.) For it seems clear that the people who are described in 2 Corinthians xi. 4 as bringing a "different gospel" are the same as those against whom the Christians of Philippi are put on their guard in Philippians iii. 2 ff., and these are definitely called the circumcision party, or rather, more scathingly, the "mutilation" party (τὴν κατατομήν).

Just where in the sequence of Pauline letters Philippians is to be placed is a difficult question—all the more difficult because of the doubts which arise about its unity. My own preference is to date it in the course of Paul's Ephesian ministry,<sup>45</sup> and to read the warnings of its third chapter in the light of 2 Corinthians x-xiii. Paul is afraid that the "evil workers" who caused him so much trouble in Corinth and elsewhere might visit Philippi, and he warns his Philippian friends against them. As to the Corinthians, so to the Philippians, he insists that he himself is as good a "Hebrew" as any of his opponents, but he has learned not to put his trust in those external features of race and upbringing of which they boasted so much. From all this we can infer that the people whose activities were causing him so much concern were those who, now as before, were trying to impose the Jewish law on his converts.

But his warfare had to be conducted on two fronts; for on the other hand there were those among his converts who played into the hands of the legalists by casting off moral restraint and asserting a liberty which was indistinguishable from licence. These people, "whose god is the belly and who glory in their

[p.333]

shame",<sup>46</sup> he denounces as enemies of the cross of Christ who are bound for perdition. The path between legal bondage and lawless licence must at times have seemed a narrow one!

It was not, however, because the legalists and libertines alike opposed Paul himself that he denounced them, but because in his eyes they perverted the gospel. Some of his opponents did not, as he saw it, pervert the gospel; and although he did not relish their opposition, he writes about them to the Philippians in a very different vein. "What has happened to me," he writes, "has really served to advance the gospel. It has become known throughout the whole praetorium and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brethren have been made confident in the Lord because of my imprisonment, and are much more bold

---

<sup>44</sup> 2 Cor. xi. 4. I owe to Mr. C. H. Pinnock the suggestion that the correlatives "another Jesus... a different spirit... a different gospel" "in this verse are significant in that "the Spirit does not operate apart from a proper evaluation of the person of Jesus, nor is the gospel still the gospel when the work of the Spirit is suppressed".

<sup>45</sup> Cf. T. W. Manson, *op. cit.* pp. 149 ff.

<sup>46</sup> Phil. iii. 19.

to speak the word of God without fear. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of partisanship, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in that I rejoice."<sup>47</sup>

Why did Paul denounce some of his opponents as subverters of the true gospel who substituted for it a message that was no real gospel at all, while he acquiesced, or indeed rejoiced, in the evangelistic activity of other opponents, even if they only did it to annoy? The answer must lie not in their personal attitude to him or their assessment of his apostolic claims, but in the message that they preached. If the message was false, then let the preacher be anathema, even if he was an angel from heaven; if the message was true, then God be thanked, even if the preacher had no worthier motive than rubbing salt into Paul's wounds. Luther was never a truer disciple of Paul than when he said: "What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even if St. Peter and St. Paul teach it. Again, what preaches Christ is apostolic, even if Judas or Annas or Pilate or Herod be the preacher."<sup>48</sup>

[p.334]

The gospel which was no gospel probably did not differ from Paul's gospel with regard to the basic recital of saving events. Where it differed was with regard to the terms on which the benefits accruing from the saving events might be enjoyed. In other words, on Paul's own showing more than one gospel was current, but not necessarily more than one kerygma.<sup>49</sup> The "gospel according to Paul" had such distinctive features that it is easily recognizable among the various New Testament presentations of the gospel. But these distinctive features Paul himself regarded as a divine mystery entrusted to him to unfold, closely bound up with his own apostleship to the Gentiles.<sup>50</sup> For that very reason no blame attached to others who had not received, and therefore could not proclaim, this "mystery". It was not for falling short in this regard that Paul denounced the preachers of "another gospel".

There is, again, no evidence that what Paul called "another gospel" laid more stress on the "historical Jesus" than Paul's own preaching did. If "Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified" before the Galatians,<sup>51</sup> a vivid account of one phase at least of the historical career of Jesus is implied. Paul's words about not knowing Christ "after the flesh" have often been appealed to as evidence that he sat rather loose to the facts of Jesus' earthly career; but I am persuaded that this is mistaken exegesis. The passage in question is well rendered thus in the New English Bible: "With us therefore worldly standards have ceased to count in our estimate of any man; even if once they counted in our understanding of Christ, they do so now no longer."<sup>52</sup> Paul is not contrasting his own knowledge of Christ with that enjoyed by the

---

<sup>47</sup> Phil. i. 12-18.

<sup>48</sup> Luther on Rom. ii. 21, quoted by J. K. S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture* (1957), p. 70.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. S. G. F. Brandon, *Modern Churchman*, n.s., v (1961-62), 225: "within two decades of the Crucifixion, according to Paul, there existed two rival *kerygmata* or gospels." For Paul, I should say, the εὐαγγέλιον included not only the κήρυγμα but its interpretation and application; the difference, however, is one of terminology—as also when A. A. T. Ehrhardt (*HTR*, 55 [1962], p.83) speaks of "more than one Gospel as issuing from Jerusalem itself (that of Stephen and his Hellenistic colleagues being contrasted with that of the Twelve). For "more than one Gospel" I should say "more than one presentation of the story of Jesus".

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Rom. xi. 13 ff., xv. 15 ff.; Col. i. 25; Eph. iii. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Gal. iii. 1.

<sup>52</sup> 2 Cor. v. 16.

Twelve; he is contrasting his own present knowledge of Christ with his attitude to him before his

[p.335]

conversion. "When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; the old order has gone, and a new order has already begun."<sup>53</sup>

This brings us back to question of Paul's relation to the Twelve and the Jerusalem leaders. The evidence from Galatians i and ii and 1 Corinthians xv has been reviewed above. When, in the earlier part of 1 Corinthians, Paul deprecates the party spirit which is rife in the church at Corinth, it is not because he disapproves of those who are being put forward as his rivals; he disapproves of a Paul party as much as of any other. What he deplores is the self-impoverishment of those Christians who avail themselves of the gifts of only one servant of the Lord when all his servants are at their disposal: "Paul or Apollos or Cephas..., all are yours."<sup>54</sup>

But what of the terms in which Paul vindicates his apostleship in 2 Corinthians x—xiii, against those whom he calls "super-apostles" (ὑπερλίαν ἀπόστολοι)?<sup>55</sup> That these super-apostles came from Judaea seems a reasonable inference from the context. Did they belong to the Twelve?

There is independent reason to believe that from A.D. 50 onwards the Twelve embarked on a more extended ministry than the Judaeen ministry to which they had, for the most part, confined themselves hitherto. At least they play no further part at Jerusalem. They were still there at the time of the Council of Jerusalem (c. A.D. 49),<sup>56</sup> but they are conspicuous by their absence when Paul visits Jerusalem with the delegates from the Gentile churches eight years later; on this later occasion we hear only of James and the elders (a Nazarene sanhedrin, it might be said) as leaders of the church.<sup>57</sup>

If some of the Twelve had come to Corinth and were exerting some influence there among Paul's converts, Paul could well regard this as a breach of the earlier agreement mentioned in Galatians ii. 1-10. If the "super-apostles" were members of the Twelve, the breach was serious enough in all conscience; it is hardly possible to press a distinction between the "super-apostles" of 2 Corinthians xi. 5 and those who are described

[p.336]

eight verses below as "false apostles,"<sup>58</sup> deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ".

We must not allow our veneration of the apostles' memory to shock us into dismissing this possibility out of hand; the apostles were men of like passions with ourselves. But the

---

<sup>53</sup> 2 Cor. v. 17.

<sup>54</sup> 1 Cor. iii. 22.

<sup>55</sup> 2 Cor. xi. 5; xii. 11.

<sup>56</sup> Acts xv. 4, 6.

<sup>57</sup> Acts xxi. 18.

<sup>58</sup> ψευδαπόστολοι, with which may be compared the ψευδάδελφοί of 2 Gal. xi. 26; Gal. ii. 4.

evidence is against the identification of these "super-apostles" with members of the Twelve. In this passage Paul is not merely hitting out at emissaries from Judaea who were undoing his work and undermining his authority at Corinth and elsewhere; he is denying that they are true apostles of Christ at all. In all his unambiguous references to the Twelve, however, he fully acknowledges their apostolic status, insisting only that his own apostleship is no less genuine than theirs.

When he found it necessary to vindicate his apostleship to the Corinthians at an earlier date, his first appeal was to the fact that he had seen the Lord—in resurrection, that is.<sup>59</sup> But by the same token he bears witness in the same epistle to the genuineness of the apostleship of the Twelve by his repetition of the evidence that they too had seen him in resurrection—it was then, in fact, that they received their definitive commission, just as Paul received his when he, belatedly, saw the risen Christ.<sup>60</sup>

I suggest that the "super-apostles" were "super" in the sense of "supernumerary" or rather "extraordinary"—*Apostoli Extraordinarii*, over and above the special apostleship of the Twelve (not to mention Paul's apostleship). If they had no place at all in their scheme of things for Paul, they may have had very little for the Twelve, whom they probably regarded as compromisers. If Paul can recognize (as he does) true apostles outside the ranks of the Twelve and himself,<sup>61</sup> there is no particular reason why his "false apostles" should be sought within those ranks.

There is another figure in apostolic history, not a member of the Twelve, whose relationship to Paul is relevant to our purpose.

[p.337]

That is Apollos, the learned Jew from Alexandria, who made an appearance in the synagogue of Ephesus in the summer of A.D. 52 and showed an accurate knowledge of the story of Jesus, but knew no baptism except that of John the Baptist.<sup>62</sup> That his was not an isolated case is indicated by the incident of the twelve Ephesian "disciples"—disciples of Jesus, surely, since that is what Luke means by the absolute μαθητής—who had received John's baptism and knew nothing about the Holy Spirit.<sup>63</sup> They could have been converts of Apollos, but this is unlikely: Luke's information about them seems to have been derived from another source than his information about Apollos.

Apollos' understanding of the gospel differed from that associated with Jerusalem and Antioch: it may well be that he represented the outlook of early Alexandrian Christianity. This is only speculation, because we do not even know that it was in his native Alexandria that he first heard the gospel. If (as many have thought) he was the writer to the Hebrews, then we have much more information about his outlook; but we just do not know whether he wrote Hebrews or not.

---

<sup>59</sup> 1 Cor. ix. 1.

<sup>60</sup> 1 Cor. xv. 5 ff.; cf. K. Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ii (1928), 50.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Rom. xvi. 7, together with the implications of Paul's coupling of Barnabas along with himself in Gal. ii. 9; 1 Cor. ix. 6 (cf. also Acts xiv. 14).

<sup>62</sup> Acts xviii. 24 ff.

<sup>63</sup> Acts xix. 1 ff.

At any rate Luke tells us that Paul's friends from Rome, Priscilla and Aquila, taught him "the way of God more accurately"<sup>64</sup> when they met him in Ephesus and then gave him a letter of introduction to the church of Corinth when he set out for that city. When he came to Corinth, he proved a tower of strength to the Christian cause there, especially when he visited the synagogues and "powerfully confuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus".<sup>65</sup>

No wonder that some of the Corinthian Christians thought that they had never heard such eloquence and learning, and looked to Apollos as the great teacher of the faith. In comparison with his line of things, they thought, Paul's teaching was elementary. But when Paul, not long afterwards, takes them to task over the development of party spirit among them, of which this was a symptom (and one of the more innocuous ones), he says nothing to suggest that he has any fault to find either with Apollos or with his teaching. "What then is Apollos?"

[p.338]

he asks. "What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."<sup>66</sup> And later he makes another friendly reference to Apollos: "As for our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brethren, but it was not at all God's will<sup>67</sup> for him to go [to Corinth] now. He will come when he has opportunity."<sup>68</sup> Had Paul regarded Apollos as the preacher of a "different gospel" "he would certainly not have pressed him to pay a further visit to Corinth.

Forty years on, the Johannine epistles give us some indication of what was and was not regarded as a true gospel in Paul's mission field at the end of the first century, according to the apostolic tradition. The true gospel was "that which was from the beginning".<sup>69</sup> Above all, it proclaimed that Jesus Christ had Come in the flesh, that his birth and death were alike real: any teaching that denied this was antichristian.<sup>70</sup> The true gospel also laid stress on the elemental virtues of life—righteousness and purity, truth and love; it was not a form of teaching that had advanced "beyond good and evil".<sup>71</sup> And it did not cater for a spiritual elite within the believing community, but for the community as a whole.<sup>72</sup>

To sum up, then, we may say that, according to the general consensus of New Testament teaching, a gospel is not a gospel when—

1. it is detached from the Jesus of history;
2. it gives little or no place to the passion;
3. it exalts human achievement in place of the grace of God;

---

<sup>64</sup> Acts xviii. 26.

<sup>65</sup> Acts xviii. 28.

<sup>66</sup> 1 Cor. iii. 5 f.

<sup>67</sup> οὐκ ἦν θέλημα. This absolute use of θέλημα usually denotes the will of God (cf. 1 Macc. iii. 60; Matt. xviii. 14; Rom. ii. 18).

<sup>68</sup> 1 Cor. xvi. 12.

<sup>69</sup> 1 John i. 1, ii. 7, 24, iii. 11; 2 John 5 f.

<sup>70</sup> 1 John iv. 2 f., v. 6 f.; 2 John 7.

<sup>71</sup> 1 John iii. 3, 7, 14 ff., 22.

<sup>72</sup> 1 John ii. 20 (οἶδατε πάντες).

4. it adds other conditions to the one which God has declared acceptable (even if those additions be things good and desirable in themselves); or

[p.339]

5. it treats righteousness and purity as things which the truly spiritual man has outstripped.

On the other hand, a gospel is a gospel when—

1. it maintains contact with the Jesus of history, affirming that "this same Jesus "who came in the flesh and died is the vindicated and exalted Lord;
2. it embraces and proclaims "the stumbling-block of the cross";
3. it extends the grace of God to men for their acceptance by faith;
4. it relies upon the power of the Spirit to make it effective in those who hear it; and
5. it issues in a life of righteousness and purity which is sustained and directed by the love of God.

---

© 1963 *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*. Reproduced by permission (<http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/specialcollections/information/publications/bulletin/>).

Prepared for the web in April 2008 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---