

INTERPRETING THE GOSPELS: THE LANDSCAPE AND THE QUEST

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At the heart of the gospel is the bold assertion that in Jesus Christ eternity has intersected time. Christianity is unique among the religions of the world not only in proclaiming that God has acted and revealed himself in history but that God has indeed entered history in his Son. The fact that God has manifested himself in time and space—this itself the culmination of many centuries of anticipation and preparation in the history of Israel—constitutes the center of the Church's faith. This sacred history (the incarnation and the complex of events surrounding it) has become the glory of Christianity.

The historical truth of the NT writings is therefore the *sine qua non* of our faith. Our stake in the historical veracity of these writings could not be greater. Yet if the center of our faith consists of historical events, and if the documents that record those events are themselves historical documents, then they demand to be studied as such. To understand and to appreciate fully the faith that we confess we must engage in historical study, which in turn—if ever we are to make observations, draw conclusions, or speak meaningfully about these matters—necessitates employment of historical criticism (that is, the making of historical judgments). This of course is where we evangelical scholars encounter a great obstacle. Because of the unfortunate bias of the historico-critical method against the supernatural, we cannot accept it as it is insisted upon by radical critical scholars.¹ How can we accept the appropriateness of a methodology that begins with an *a priori* denial of the reality of the supernatural in history—the very center of the Biblical narrative? On the other hand, we cannot do without historical criticism if we affirm the historical nature of our faith.² In fact, evangelicals must break a new path in honing an historical criticism that is not inimical to the supernatural but that is at the same time honest in grappling with history as his-

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¹We single out radical critical scholars because of their utilization of the method with a particularly negative bias when compared with, for example, the use of their critical method by scholars in the field of classical studies.

²Even H. Lindell, while rejecting the historical-critical method, is forced to say, "No evangelical ever says the alternative to the historical-critical methodology is 'an unhistorical and uncritical approach to Scripture.'" But how there can be an "evangelical critical approach to Scripture," given Lindell's conception of inerrancy, is difficult to see. *The Bible in the Balance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 74-75. Similarly, although G. Maier calls attention to some weaknesses of the historical-critical method, he suggests its replacement with "a historical-Biblical one" and at the moment of decision shies away from a complete rejection of criticism: "A historical method? Yes! A critical method? 'No!' or 'Caution!' is the watchword." *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* (tr. E. W. Leverenz and R. F. Norden; St. Louis: Concordia, 1977) 50. Evangelicals should, of course, be known for their caution in the utilization of this method.

For a judicious and helpful essay on this subject see especially I. H. Marshall, "Historical Criticism," in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods* (ed. I. H. Marshall; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 126-138.

tory. Of course this is not easily done, nor can such a methodology provide quick and easy solutions to our problems. We shall have to learn to live with some ongoing tensions and uncertainties as well as learn to be tolerant of differences among ourselves. But some such middle way must be found if we are to avoid lapsing into a fundamentalist obscurantism on the one hand or a vapid liberalism on the other.³ We have had some pioneers,⁴ we have our call,⁵ and a method begins to emerge.⁶ But much remains to be done.

I. THE GOSPELS AND HISTORY

The gospels are historical writings that tell us the story of Jesus, the climax of God's revelation and work in history. They are human documents as well as the inspired word of God. These documents, like all the writings of Scripture, live and breathe the reality and concreteness of history. They are not data banks of timeless truths, nor is it fair to characterize them as repositories of propositional truth. (This is not to deny that there are propositional statements in the gospels or that the truth of the gospels can be put into propositions.) We may focus our attention on the extent of the historical nature of the gospels⁷ by means of the following analysis.

³This search for a middle way, which itself constitutes a wide spectrum, is to my thinking the challenge of evangelicalism.

⁴E. g., Kähler, Schlatter, Cullmann, O. Piper, Thielicke. See the interesting article by W. W. Gasque, "The Promise of Adolf Schlatter," *Crux* 15/2 (1979) 5-9.

⁵Most recently from one no less than J. D. Smart in his impressive book *The Past, Present and Future of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979). Smart calls attention to the poverty of the historico-critical method, bemoaning "the distortion that is taking place with the elimination of the participation and action of the living God from the story" (p. 124). Further, Smart writes (p. 145): "The bedrock on which that future rests is surely the double nature of the contents of Scripture—which corresponds to the double nature of Jesus Christ. Everything in Scripture is history and must be open to the most thoroughly critical and reconstructive investigation. But at the same time everything in Scripture is directly or indirectly witness to the reality of God's presence, a presence which, whether in Jesus Christ or in the apostolic witness or in the Old Testament traditions, has always defied the attempts of a purely historical methodology to capture it. It demands therefore a responsible and competent theological investigation and interpretation. But the two cannot be separated, for, just as the divine presence and revelation and the human historical person are one in Jesus Christ, so the Scriptures as a whole are the unfolding of the drama of God's presence and action in a period of history." The best promise for the future, concludes Smart, lies with the evangelicals and the Roman Catholics.

⁶G. Ladd calls for an "historical-theological criticism" which recognizes the revelatory dimension in biblical history and the revelatory nature of the Bible." *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 40. Smart speaks of "a valid historical-theological methodology" (*Past*, 83), a Biblical science that "can maintain its scientific character while taking full account of the presence and activity of God in the biblical story, giving him his primary place and his continuing significance in the interpretation" (*ibid.*, p. 94). P. Stuhlmacher argues for a "hermeneutics of consent to the biblical texts" involving "a willingness to open ourselves anew to the claim of tradition, of the present, and of transcendence." We have before us "the possibility and freedom of making use of historical criticism where it is really productive, namely in historical analysis and description, and at the same time of transcending it where it threatens to restrict our encounter with historical reality." *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (tr. R. A. Harrisville; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 85, 90.

⁷By "gospels" I deliberately intend to include John with the synoptics. If the synoptics are now perceived as theological documents, John is increasingly seen to contain reliable historical tradition. Thus for our purposes the four gospels can be considered together. This of course is not to deny the real difference between John and the synoptics.

1. The gospels record a story that is itself an *historical process*. The story has a beginning, although to be sure it is also the continuation and culmination of an historical process that preceded it. From the beginning of the story, through its center, and on to its climax in the crucifixion and resurrection, we observe a deepening revelation by Jesus of what is occurring and must yet occur, the steady re-directing of the disciples' faulty conception of Jesus' purpose, and a painfully slow progress in the understanding and assimilation of the significance of Jesus on the part of the twelve. Despite the preparation given by Jesus the disciples are overwhelmed by the crucifixion of their Master, and only after the resurrection are they able to arrive at the beginning of a satisfactory comprehension of what had indeed occurred. The gospels are, from their beginning to their climactic conclusion, the records of an historical process.

2. The story of the gospels is subject to an ever-deepening *historical understanding* following the crucifixion and resurrection. The resurrection is of course the central cause of the earliest Church's understanding of the significance of Christ and his work. But following the resurrection occurs a period of new instruction and revelation, beginning with the teaching of the risen Lord and the experience of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost and extending into the next few decades under the superintendence of the Spirit. During this period of time the apostles, with a maturing perspective enriched through the expansion of the missionary endeavor, come to an ever-deepening understanding of the full meaning of what had so recently happened in their midst. It is only with the passing of time that the Church, led by the Spirit, is able to formulate a Christology, a soteriology and an ecclesiology adequate to the truth of who Jesus Christ was (and is) and what had come to pass through his death and resurrection. As is always the case when God reveals himself through an historical process, the whole story with its full scope and significance cannot be revealed or understood from the first moment.⁸ Thus, as in the OT so also in the NT we must be prepared for a progressive historical understanding of what God has done and is doing. It is partly for this reason that the writings of the NT canon themselves span approximately half a century, that the earliest of them is written some twenty years after the death of Christ, and that the gospels begin to be written in the last third of the century.⁹

3. The gospels are *historical records* of the story of Jesus—that is, documents that have their own historical contexts. They stem from certain places and times and speak to specific communities. Virtually none of this information is directly available to us from the documents themselves but can only be surmised from the character of their contents. Each of the gospels has its own perspective and its own interests as can be seen from what is included, what is emphasized, and the

⁸When the fourth evangelist writes that Abraham saw the day of Jesus and was glad (John 8:56) we are not to suppose that Abraham knew about Jesus Christ and the work he was to do. Rather we are to conclude that Abraham comprehended and believed what God had promised him, and since that is of one fabric and hence in continuity with what Christ has come to do he may be said to have seen and have believed in the fulfillment brought by Christ.

⁹The notion of historical understanding does not necessitate that earlier writers and interpreters of Jesus are wrong, but rather that what they say is partial and not exhaustive truth. Progressive understanding may, with the aid of the concepts of inspiration and canonicity, be regarded as involving continuity and not contradiction. Furthermore, in my view only the assumption of a real continuity is compatible with the tenacity of oral tradition throughout the first century.

shape that is given to the tradition. One of the beneficial results of redaction criticism is the renewed interest in the contribution of the evangelists themselves to the gospels they produced.¹⁰ The written word of God is at the same time the words of real men, rooted in real cultural contexts. Any attempt to understand the gospels (or any part of the NT) that ignores this fact will fail to do justice to their fundamental nature.

In the gospels, then, we encounter that which belongs to history in at least three senses: a process occurring in history, a progressive understanding in history, and documents themselves produced in history. More simply we may say that the story of Jesus occurred in history, was understood in history, and was recorded in history. To undercut any of this is to attack Christianity at its heart—namely, the assertion that God truly entered the historical process. To deny or weaken the humanity of Scripture in a well-intentioned attempt to defend its character as divine revelation is no better than denying or weakening the humanity of Christ in attempting to defend his deity. A docetic view of the Scriptures is as wrong as a docetic view of Christ.¹¹ In both instances the true glory of our faith is missed.

By focusing our attention on the humanity of Scripture we have come to the heart of the problem of hermeneutics. Scripture must be approached and interpreted as it is—that is, in a way that is congruent with its nature. It is the inspired word of God, but it is also the words of men—and it is, therefore, *ipso facto* enmeshed in historical process.¹² This indeed is the fundamental cause of our problems as evangelicals who champion Scripture as the final and authoritative word of God. We must next consider what this means so far as the gospels particularly are concerned.

II. THREE HISTORICAL TIME FRAMES

In keeping with the historical character of the gospel tradition, we may conceive the three points made above in terms of three successive time frames. This is important to do if we are to come to grips with the final products—the gospels—as they finally come to us. The first time frame is the actual time of the ministry of Jesus, the time when Jesus proclaimed the kingdom in word and deed, the time when the disciples puzzled over the intention of Jesus and were mystified by references to his death. The second time frame begins with the resurrection and extends to the time of the writing of the gospels, thus covering the

¹⁰The fact that redaction-critical studies have not been able to agree in their analyses of the gospels does not take away from the propriety of the quest; it only indicates the difficulty of the task and the inadequacy of the method. See J. Rohde, *Rediscovering the Teaching of the Evangelists* (tr. D. M. Barton; rev. ed.; London: SCM, 1968).

¹¹As the affirmation of the full humanity of Christ does not mean the acceptance of sin or error in him, so the affirmation of the full humanity of Scripture does not necessitate the presence of “errors” in the Biblical documents.

¹²It is worth quoting the words of E. F. Harrison in an excellent article: “It would seem that the only healthy attitude for conservatives is to welcome criticism and be willing to join it. No view of Scripture can indefinitely be sustained if it runs counter to the facts. That the Bible claims inspiration is patent. The problem is to define the nature of that inspiration in the light of the phenomena contained therein.” “The Phenomena of Scripture” in *Revelation and the Bible* (ed. C. F. H. Henry; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958) 239.

three decades of the so-called oral tradition period, the period of increasing understanding of Jesus Christ made possible especially by the catalyst of the resurrection. The third time frame is that of the written gospels themselves, important for us because at an historical juncture special to each gospel God chose to put the tradition hitherto guarded by the apostles into fixed, final and canonical form—a legacy to the Church universal of all time.

Critical scholarship has spoken of these time frames using the expression *Sitz im Leben* (“situation in life”): (1) *Sitz im Leben Jesu*, the situation in the life of Jesus; (2) *Sitz im Leben der alten Kirche*, the situation in the life of the early Church; and (3) *Sitz im Leben des Verfassers*, the situation in the life of the evangelist (sometimes called *Sitz im Evangelium*—that is, the evangelist’s purpose). Evangelicals should have no problem with the legitimacy of these time frames as such. It is rather in the question of continuity between the time frames, the relation of each time frame to the others, and the degree of correspondence in the tradition within each time frame, that difficulties arise. These are the matters that demand our attention.

1. *Relating the First Time Frame to Those That Follow.* The first time frame is separated from the second and third time frames by the resurrection of Jesus. As we know from Luke-Acts, this event is responsible for turning a group of disillusioned and defeated disciples into bold, excited proclaimers of the new salvation brought by Christ. The resurrection became the cornerstone of the kerygma that they proclaimed—the kerygma responsible for the astonishing growth of the Church in the first century. Luke specifically points out the importance of the teaching received by the disciples from the post-resurrection Jesus (Luke 24:25-27, 44-49; Acts 1:3-8). The resurrection, the teaching of the resurrected Jesus, and the experience of Pentecost are all extremely important in leading the disciples into a deeper understanding of the meaning of Jesus and his gospel.

Radical scholars, of course, regard the resurrection experience as a kind of continental divide separating the “Jesus of history” from the “Christ of faith.” For Bultmann there is only discontinuity between the two. Since in the gospels we only encounter the latter, the former is inaccessible to us. All the same, Bultmann regards the Christ of the NT (the product of the faith of the Church) as totally unlike Jesus as he actually was. In this viewpoint Bultmann is controlled by his presuppositions. The Jesus of history (N. B.: to whom we have no access) could not have been like the Christ of the gospels. Miracles cannot happen; God cannot enter history. Thus the central nerve of Christianity is cut and the gospels become, instead of a true story, parables about the meaning of existence from a Heideggerian perspective.

More recently some of Bultmann’s students, worried about the docetism of their teacher, have begun to find continuity—however slight—between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history. This trend, which is bound to increase, is headed in the right direction but is hindered by the limitations of the criteria that have been imposed (to be mentioned later). In the attempt to arrive at “a critically assured minimum,” the new quest of the historical Jesus has been unable to explore sufficiently the extent of the continuity between Jesus as he actually was and as he came to be believed in by the early Church.

A number of scholars have reacted negatively to the polarization of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. The early Church, contrary to Bultmann, was

interested in the historical Jesus.¹³ The gospel traditions give evidence that they have been preserved and handed down faithfully and reliably.¹⁴ Strong marks of continuity between the Jesus of history and the Lord of faith can be detected by a careful study of the materials.¹⁵ Reasonable and responsible scholarship does not find in the impact of the resurrection an impenetrable barrier between the time frame of the ministry of Jesus and the perception of Jesus in the post-resurrection time frame. Instead, a remarkable continuity exists between the two.¹⁶

It must of course immediately be pointed out that continuity does not mean identity. We are discussing here the way in which Jesus was perceived by the disciples in the two different time frames rather than Jesus himself (although there is a sense in which the resurrected, ascended Jesus is not identical with the Jesus of the earthly ministry—that is, the person is the same, but not the status or role). After the resurrection Jesus was understood in a way that was impossible before the resurrection. There was certainly a Christology experienced and confessed in the first time frame. But it was to some extent veiled and implicit, understood only partially, and conceived narrowly, being mixed in the minds of the disciples with expectations of an imminent fulfillment along national-political lines. Unassimilated—indeed, altogether beyond the disciples, for the time being—were the necessity of the cross and the power of the resurrection, the ascension of Jesus to the position of kingly rule at the right hand of the Father, and the true nature of the kingdom, as well as its scope and basis. In short the full significance and hence the true identity of Jesus, as it comes to expression in, for example, Colossians, Hebrews and John, was hardly understood prior to the resurrection and its aftermath. The Lord proclaimed in the earliest kerygma is not identical with the way in which the Jesus of history manifested himself. But neither are the two totally different. Strong ties of continuity exist at a variety of levels.

2. *Relating the Third Time Frame to Those That Precede.* The third time frame refers to the period when our gospels were actually written and thus will vary considerably from gospel to gospel. The gospel tradition, or parts of it, may have been written down at a very early time (cf. Luke 1:1).¹⁷ Indeed we may even contemplate the possibility of private, written memoranda produced by the disciples themselves.¹⁸ But what is unique about the products of the third time frame is that they provide us with canonical—that is, finally authoritative—accounts of the story of Jesus, the inspired word of God for the Church for all time.

The gospels are obviously to be understood as utilizing and building on the

¹³See especially G. N. Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching* (SNTSMS 27; Cambridge, 1974).

¹⁴See the convincing arguments of B. Gerhardsson, *The Origins of the Gospel Traditions* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

¹⁵See B. Reicke, "Incarnation and Exaltation: The Historic Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ," *Int* 16 (1962) 156-158; C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* (SBT 2/1; London: SCM, 1967) 43-76; J. Jeremias, *The Problem of the Historical Jesus* (tr. N. Perrin; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).

¹⁶See also I. H. Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

¹⁷Q, in my opinion, may possibly have been an oral tradition of the sayings of Jesus in Greek translation.

¹⁸See Gerhardsson, *Origins*, 22-24.

deepened understanding of Jesus and his work that emerges in the second time frame. This is true not only because of their dependence on oral and written traditions circulating in the second time frame but also because they themselves stand within the process of interpretation and represent the apex of that process. That there was process and development in the second time frame should not be denied. That the Gentile mission and exposure to Hellenism influenced the tradition cannot be doubted. On the other hand, to define somewhat rigidly three separate stages of development (as exhibited in the Palestinian Jewish Church, the Hellenistic Jewish Church, and the Hellenistic Gentile Church)¹⁹ is to go far beyond the evidence. Moreover the stages cannot be kept distinct,²⁰ and the argument that the developments in time frame two are of such a nature that they rule out the possibility of continuity between the Christology of the NT and Jesus as he was in history is simply unfounded.²¹

The gospels are documents of faith designed to elicit faith, but they are also interested in history. While the gospels are not biographies they do contain some biographical information. In point of fact it is unthinkable that the evangelists or the early Church had no interest in the preservation of historical tradition. The importance of the tradition as history in the early Church can hardly be over-emphasized. The tradition by its nature is a holy tradition, one that was cherished, guarded and carefully handed on. A major reason for the existence of the twelve was the special continuity they provided between the first and successive time frames. They are the special bearers and custodians of the story of Jesus by virtue of their privilege in having been participants in his ministry.²² In the early Church the chain of authority, God—Jesus—the apostles, is abundantly evident. It is only natural, then, that the tradition in the second time frame was under the careful maintenance of the apostles and that by God's purpose and providence the final, authoritative products of the third time frame should be closely, if more indirectly in the case of Mark and Luke,²³ associated with the apostles.

III. THE EVANGELISTS' CREATIVITY

In the third time frame we have particularly to grapple with the impact of the

¹⁹For the application of these stages to the development of Christology see e. g. F. Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (tr. H. Knight and G. Ogg; London, 1969); R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (London, 1965).

²⁰See especially I. H. Marshall, "Palestinian and Hellenistic Christianity. Some Critical Comments," *NTS* 19 (1973) 271-287. See also his discussion of developmental Christology in *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1976).

²¹C. F. D. Moule has given an impressive argument in favor of continuity in *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977). See also his *Phenomenon*.

²²The election of a successor to Judas Iscariot is thus limited to "one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us" (Acts 1:21-22). To be sure Paul cannot satisfy this criterion, but we may be confident that his own deficiency at this point was remedied to some extent during the fifteen days he spent with Peter in Jerusalem (Gal 1:18).

²³I accept the statement of Papias (Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.39) that Mark records the tradition as he heard it from Peter. The association of Luke with Paul is significant, but not of course in terms of the historical reliability of Luke's gospel. More pertinent here is Luke's mention of "those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" (Luke 1:2) upon whom Luke is also dependent (which would obviously include the apostles).

evangelists on the tradition. It is obvious that each, under the inspiration of the Spirit, gives his own shape (and thus interpretation) to that common tradition. (1) To begin with, each selects from the reservoir of available material. Some select what others omit; some omit what others select. Selection and omission may occasionally appear arbitrary but usually play into the special perspective of the author.²⁴ (2) The evangelists are quite free to arrange their materials in an order that suits their own purposes. At first the tradition consisted of separate pericopae which only gradually came to be linked together. (The passion narrative is widely recognized as the earliest ordering of pericopae in the pre-gospel tradition.) This means that apart from a few fixed points (e. g. the baptism, testing, confession at Caesarea Philippi and announcement of death, transfiguration, triumphal entry) the chronological order of the deeds and words of Jesus cannot be known. Each evangelist exercises the right to make groupings of miracles or sayings of Jesus in keeping with his own plan;²⁵ none seems to feel bound by the order of events in his sources (so far as we can tell, for example, from Matthew's and Luke's use of Mark and Q). Chronology, except in the broadest sense, was apparently not a concern of the evangelists. The attempt therefore to press for detailed chronological harmony between the gospels (by whatever means) is not only misconceived but also unnecessary. The gospels provide stronger portraits of Jesus by their freedom in this regard.

Theological interpretation thus takes place already with the selection and arrangement of the traditional materials. But it takes place more actively in (3) the modification and adaptation of the materials within each gospel. Careful comparison of the same pericope as it is found in different gospels will often reveal the freedom exercised by the evangelists in retelling the tradition.²⁶ It is here above all that one gets a glimpse of the evangelist's context, interests and purposes as well as an indirect knowledge of his readers. It is not true, as often alleged, that the gospels tell us more about the churches to which they were directed than they do about Jesus as he actually was. But the gospels do tell us about their authors and readers. This is often most easily gleaned from the way in which an evangelist alters his sources (therefore redaction criticism of Matthew and Luke is easiest).

There are, of course, different degrees of alteration. Some changes are minor, involving only stylistic improvements or insignificant variations in wording (possibly due to different translations of the underlying Aramaic?). Others involve relatively small but deliberate changes for reasons that are often readily discernible (e. g., softening the potentially objectionable, protecting against misunder-

²⁴Examples: Mark for the most part omits the teaching of Jesus, producing a gospel with a kerygmatic emphasis on the deeds of Jesus; Matthew collects the teachings of Jesus, no doubt for catechetical purposes in the Church. For specific examples, cf. Matt 9:21 with Mark 5:28-33 (omitted for Mark's Christological interest?); cf. Luke 17:1-2 with Mark 9:42-48 (omitted by Luke as Semitic hyperbole?); cf. the omission of Mark 7:1-23 in Luke (because of no significance to a Gentile audience?).

²⁵Examples: The five teaching discourses in Matthew (contrast dispersion of same material throughout Luke). At the beginning of his gospel, Mark collects pericopae illustrating the opposition of the Pharisees to Jesus (2:1-3:6); Luke has arranged much of his material into the journey to Jerusalem (9:51-19:27). Specifically, cf. Luke's transference of Mark 6:1-6 to Luke 4:16-30.

²⁶Examples: In 15:1-20 Matthew adapts Mark 7:1-23 so as to make it more acceptable to Jewish readers; Matthew (12:12) and Luke (6:10) omit reference to Jesus' anger in Mark 3:5 (cf. also their modification of Mark 3:21, 4:38 and 10:14); and Matthew's revision of Mark 10:18 in 19:17.

standing, clarifying, emphasizing, heightening). Some modification is much more extensive, occasionally manifesting distinct theological interests of the evangelist and his community. The words and deeds of Jesus are narrated so as to bring out their significance for the Church in time frame three. Words originally spoken to Jesus' opponents are adapted and applied to the Church. But that we need to remain open to this on occasion does not mean that Jeremias' hypothesis of the overall shift in the *Sitz im Leben* of the parables need be accepted *in toto*.²⁷ There is a legitimate difference between the *Sitz im Leben Jesu* and that of the evangelists, but Jeremias has overdrawn the contrast by pressing for a monotypic consistency in the teaching of Jesus.

The evangelists show considerable interpretative and creative skill in mediating the Jesus tradition to the churches for which they write. They are indeed writing the story of Jesus and are dependent throughout on solid historical tradition. They at the same time bring out the theological significance of Jesus' deeds and words, especially for their churches but also for the Church universal. That their presentation of the same material presents different perspectives with different theological emphases points to the intrinsic richness of what they portray.

If the evangelists modify, adapt, interpret and apply the tradition, it has also been suggested that (4) they are able to create materials for inclusion in their gospels, whether isolated sayings of Jesus or entire pericopae. Indeed, it is the opinion of radical critical scholarship that the majority of the gospel tradition, rather than reflecting actual history of the first time frame, is the result of the creative work of the post-resurrection Church and the evangelists. The resultant dichotomy of the inaccessible Jesus of history and the gospels' Christ of faith has been referred to earlier in this paper. Our purpose here is simply to call attention to the impropriety of such an overwhelmingly negative bias against the reliability of the gospel tradition.

This negative bias has put the burden of proof upon any saying of Jesus for which authenticity is claimed.²⁸ Thus only when a saying can meet certain criteria, singly or preferably in combination, can it be accepted as going back to Jesus himself.²⁹ The first and by far the most important criterion is that of dissimilarity. Only sayings dissimilar to—that is, not parallel in—both contemporary Judaism and the beliefs of the early Church can be accepted as certainly spoken by Jesus. The absurdity of this criterion has been effectively pointed out.³⁰ What advantage is there of arriving at “a critically assured minimum” if singling out the pure distinctives in this manner results in a severely distorted picture of Jesus, as it is bound to do? The second criterion, that of multiple attestation (appearance of the same material in more than one strand of the tradition: e. g., Q,

²⁷J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (2d ed.; tr. by S. H. Hooke; London: SCM, 1972). Jeremias unfortunately understands Jesus in strictly eschatological terms and so disallows the authenticity of parables that allude to the life of the Church in the interim period between the death of Jesus and his return.

²⁸A balanced and well-reasoned discussion can be found in R. T. France, “The Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus,” *History, Criticism and Faith* (2d ed.; ed. C. Brown; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977) 101-143.

²⁹For the clearest discussion of this viewpoint see N. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1967) 15-49; *What is Redaction Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969).

³⁰See especially M. D. Hooker, “Christology and Methodology,” *NTS* 17 (1971) 480-487; “On Using the Wrong Tool,” *Theology* 75 (1972) 570-581.

Mark, M, L), may add confidence to the conclusion of authenticity but should not be (and is not) absolutized. That is, we must not insist that only material with multiple attestation is authentic. (Of course, much material with multiple attestation is nevertheless rejected by radical critical scholarship.) The third and final criterion is that of coherence. Here material that has passed the first criterion becomes the source of an emerging picture (e. g., an apocalyptic visionary, an eschatological prophet), and further material that supports or is consistent with that picture is also accorded the status of reliability. But it is obvious that this may serve only to accentuate an already eccentric and misleading picture.

There is, of course, something fundamentally wrong with an *a priori* negativity which must then produce criteria of authenticity such as these. In fact the character of the gospel tradition by its conservative nature is such that the burden of proof should never have shifted from inauthenticity to authenticity. As in any *bona fide* historical study the presumption must lie in favor of (or at least not against) the sources until and unless it is reasonably demonstrated that they are basically untrustworthy (as in the courts the fairest rule is "innocent until proven guilty," not vice versa).³¹

What then shall we say of the purpose of the evangelists who are responsible for what the Church confesses as Holy Scripture? The documents they produced are theological and interpretative, designed to elicit faith within the readers. They are written from a distinctly favorable position insofar as the meaning of the events they record is concerned. Through their retrospection we are enabled to comprehend the significance of Jesus' words and deeds in a way that the actual participants could not have. (This is especially true of the gospel of John, but also of the synoptics.) At the same time, however, they are recording history. In my view we will be closest to the truth if we assume that the evangelists always have authentic historical tradition as the basis of what they write.³²

IV. CREATIVITY AND CONTINUITY

In the gospels, then, we have both theology and history. The two should be seen as quite compatible, not as mutually exclusive. But how much theological "creativity" do we encounter in the evangelists' retelling of the story of Jesus? They do display considerable creativity in shaping their respective narratives and in interpreting, modifying and adapting the materials of historical tradition that they take up. The point to be stressed here is that this creativity is not only under the general supervision of the Spirit but also such that it stands in continuity with the actual state of affairs in time frame one. The fact that different evangelists can put different interpretations on the same materials should not be surprising or alarming. The deeds and words of Jesus by their nature can have several meanings and applications in the Church. Difference, therefore, is not neces-

³¹Jeremias writes, against the Bultmannian perspective, that careful study of the evidence "shows so much faithfulness and such respect towards the tradition of the sayings of Jesus that we are justified in drawing up the following principle of method: In the synoptic tradition it is the inauthenticity, and not the authenticity, of the sayings of Jesus that must be demonstrated." *New Testament Theology* (tr. J. Bowden; London: SCM, 1971) 37.

³²For probing and constructive views of form criticism see E. E. Ellis, "New Directions in Form Criticism," *Jesus Christus in Historie und Theologie* (ed. G. Strecker; Tübingen: Mohr, 1975) 299-315; G. Stanton, "Form Criticism Revisited," *What About the New Testament?* (eds. M. Hooker and C. Hickling; London: SCM, 1975) 13-27.

sarily distortion. The differences between the evangelists are thus, in the main, complementary. They are like perceptions of a multifaceted diamond, all of which trace back to and converge upon a single source, thus providing us with a richer comprehension of Jesus and his significance than any single perception could ever have done.

But do the evangelists ever go beyond working creatively with the tradition and actually create material out of thin air, so to speak? This is widely held by radical critical scholars and for a good portion of the totality. We argue, to the contrary, that conservatism here is the most proper attitude. Among other things to be kept in mind are: the evidence of the importance of the tradition and its careful preservation in the early Church, evidence of considerable restraint in imposing the theology of the post-resurrection Church on the narratives (especially the synoptics), the nonoccurrence in the gospels of contemporary issues in the early Church, and the continuing presence and control of actual eyewitnesses of the ministry of Jesus. On the other side, there is the impossibility of proving that Jesus did not say or do something. The negative conclusion is usually drawn in favor of an *a priori* construct of Jesus that presumes far more than we know about what Jesus “could” or “could not” have said. Jesus, his work and purpose are all highly complex, and we must be prepared as necessary to hold certain sayings in tension with each other; and, given the actualities of the first time frame, we must be prepared for the unusual and the unexpected. We must not whittle down the Jesus of history so that he conforms to our preconceived and simplistic notions of “what he must have been like.” This does not, however, mean that the work of historical criticism comes to a complete halt.

If the evangelists were able to work creatively with the tradition, may they not have been able to create on their own? The possibility must surely be said to exist. But if the evangelists ever do create, they never create *ex nihilo*—that is, they never record material that stems only from an isolated third time frame. They do not, so to speak, work in a vacuum. They are writing theological history, and their theologizing never goes on in isolation from the historical tradition. Therefore in the last analysis creativity of every kind in the gospels stands in continuity with what Jesus actually said and did.

It is now common to hear the argument that some of the seemingly anachronistic sayings of Jesus in the gospels may derive from the resurrected Jesus speaking directly to Christian prophets in the third time frame. We do of course have some words in the gospels from the resurrected Jesus prior to his ascension (e. g., Matt 28:18-20; Luke 24:44-49). But what is meant here are words spoken to prophets in the early Church after the ascension of Jesus, which eventually become inserted into the accounts of the pre-resurrection ministry of Jesus.³³ Again however, owing to the intrinsic difficulty of proving such claims, one must rest content with the suggestion of possibility.³⁴ In any event the number of sayings that might come under this category is relatively small. It is much more likely that sayings that strike critical scholars as intolerably anachronistic are the result of the creative, adaptive work of the evangelists on their historical tradition.

³³Among probable examples are thought to be Matt 18:20; Luke 11:49-51; and (for the resurrected Jesus) Matt 28:18-20.

³⁴See D. Hill, “On the Evidence for the Creative Role of Christian Prophets,” *NTS* 20 (1973-74) 262-274; *New Testament Prophecy* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979) 160-185.

In all of this it seems obvious that conservatism and humility are appropriate. We do not know the extent of the creativity, conscious or unconscious, of the early Church in the second time frame or of the evangelists in the third time frame. Undoubtedly their stance toward the tradition is conservative, and the material of the tradition remains intact to a very large degree. But the new situation will have left its mark on the tradition (to a minor degree in the synoptics; to a major degree in John), and we must be open to the amount of freedom the evangelists had in producing their accounts. Obviously in the making of judgments about passages in the gospels humility is called for on both sides—that is, in this area dogmatism is ruled out. We must be humble enough to admit the possibility that a passage represents the creative work of an evangelist. Radical critical scholars, on the other hand, should present their views with much more tentativeness than they do, by the very nature of the situation.

V. THE NATURE OF THE GOSPELS

Our thesis is that the gospels are thoughtful, practical, interpretative accounts of the story of Jesus, which are themselves the culmination of a process of maturing and deepening understanding possible only in the second and third time frames. The purpose of the gospels is indeed to give history, but history as it now should and can be told. There is inevitably a creative dimension involved in this, but—as is true also of the second time frame—that creativity is always anchored in a substratum of tradition. We do not have identity between the first time frame and the gospel accounts of it, but we do have continuity—continuity that allows for development and that at the same time always keeps us in contact with the Jesus of history. The gospels give us history, but more than history. They give us theology, but theology that is not inimical to the history being told.

We are the richer because our gospels are what they are. If the gospels were the written equivalents of videotapes—that is, the results of a kind of flat, disinterested reporting of “the bare facts”—we should be immeasurably impoverished. Comparatively, Jesus would be enigmatic, his words obscure, his intent confusing, his ministry bewildering. (Of course we should still do quite well—better than the disciples—in making sense of it all, since we would be reading these accounts from our post-resurrection perspective.)

What we have in the gospels as they are is perhaps analogous in some ways to the “slow-action replay” that we encounter in television coverage of sports events. In these replays the action can be dramatically slowed down so that one is able to see much more than one was able to see in the action as it actually occurred. If one is given the full treatment—close-up, slow-action, forward-and-reverse, split-screen, the same scene from several perspectives, and with the verbal commentary and interpretation of an expert superimposed—one has a fair analogy of what the evangelists do. The correspondence is striking especially in that this kind of replay is in one sense what actually occurred, but in another sense is quite different from what occurred (not only in speed but also in what one individual is capable of perceiving). One might add to the force of the analogy by pointing out that the true significance of certain plays can only be known after the game is over. Now they are often seen in a new light, their true meaning dependent on what subsequently transpired. The gospels are like slow-action, analytical replays with expert commentary seen after the conclusion of the game.

The gospels are truer portraits of Jesus than they would have been had they

only given us “the bare facts.” The irony is that to the extent that the evangelists go beyond “the bare facts” they give us what in the last analysis is a more accurate portrait of Jesus and his significance.³⁵ Since the evangelists know with full certainty the meaning of what transpired, there is an authority in their presentation of the story that is unmistakable. Their creativity in its own way not only demonstrates that authority but also paradoxically amounts to the honoring of the tradition.³⁶ The tradition is preserved as it ought to be—intact and yet enhanced by the insight of a mature perspective.

VI. FOUR GOSPELS

It is most accurate to say, as did the early Church, that we have one gospel in four renditions (“the gospel according to . . .”). But why four renditions, each blessed with the status of canonical authority? How do we handle four different interpretations of Jesus and the myriad of differences in detail between the four evangelists?

We would be much the poorer if we had only one rendition of the story of Jesus. God has given us four inspired interpretations—interpretations that are of definitive and binding authority. The interpretations are different, but compatible and complementary. We should explore, delight in and profit from the distinctives of each gospel, for in this manner we have more effective access to the meaning of the story of Jesus. It is a mistake, therefore, to attempt to make one comprehensive narrative of the four and to dull the distinctives of any of the four. We also should not feel pressured into harmonizing the gospels. On occasion, as appropriate, harmonizing may of course be legitimate. But we must be content to let the gospels be what they are. None of the four was meant to be read as one of four (or three). None of the evangelists writes with a consciousness of the need to be harmonizable with the others. Indeed, the way in which Matthew and Luke can reorganize the material drawn from Mark and Q suggests that they were oblivious to our modern concern for producing a harmonious chronicle out of different available narratives. Their notion of what a truthful narrative required was rather different from the expectations of some in our day.

We are better off for the kind of gospels we have and for having four rather than one. Evangelicals need to learn to avoid becoming defensive on this score.

VII. THE QUEST

What is required of evangelicals in our day is, in my opinion, an openness to

³⁵In my view this is the explanation of why the fourth gospel was written. The author, familiar with the synoptics (but not dependent on them), felt that the story of Jesus should be told for the Church in such a way as to make explicit what the synoptics were content to leave implicit. The gospel of John, in my view, still works with a historical substratum but maximizes every opportunity to reveal the true significance of Jesus for his readers.

³⁶Cf. the remark of T. W. Manson with reference to the use of the OT in the NT: “Once found it became a clear duty to express it [the meaning of Scripture]; and accurate reproduction of the traditional wording of the Divine oracles took second place to publication of what was held to be their essential meaning and immediate application. Odd as it may seem to us, the freedom with which they handled the Biblical text is a direct result of the supreme importance which they attached to it.” “The Argument from Prophecy,” *JTS* 46 (1945) 135-136.

Because of the supreme importance of the tradition about Jesus, and because the evangelists knew in retrospect the glorious significance of Jesus and what he said and did, they authoritatively and creatively re-express the story in order that those who read may know the truth.

the phenomena of Scripture—in particular, to the gospels as they are. To retreat to a noncritical approach to the gospels, however good the motivation, is to cut across the nature of God's word as he gave it in history, and it is thus to weaken the Christian faith at its heart. While evangelicals must stress the basic integrity of the gospel tradition for reasons based on solid scholarship, they must also learn humility with regard to aspects of that tradition. Given the nature of our gospels, we must learn to live with varying degrees of probability on the matter of continuity between the first time frame and the gospel narratives. Evangelicals must encourage an atmosphere of freedom wherein scholars can pursue redaction criticism positively without the vitiating presuppositions of radical criticism. We who champion Scripture as God's word can only gain by the thorough study of the individual theologies of the evangelists. What are the theologies of the four evangelists if not gifts of God to be celebrated? Why did God choose to give us four different perspectives on the life and work of Jesus if they are not to be cherished for their distinctives?

The four gospels remain the inspired, infallible word of God. It is they, as they are, that possess canonical authority for the Church. When we press beyond the gospels to the tradition underlying them and the formation of that tradition, we do so not in a search for a more definitive authority but for insight into the historical process that produced our gospels. In becoming familiar with that process and by exploring the expanding understanding and the developing perception of Jesus, we come close to the essence of the faith: God's revelation in history. The result of making this excursion into the pre-gospel time frames will be a more effective understanding of the gospels, for our hermeneutic must be based on and grow out of the nature of the gospels and not be superimposed on them. The interpretation of the gospels will obviously benefit greatly from an appreciation of their true character.

Finally, a comment on the implications of this perspective for evangelicals. The viewpoint argued for in this paper is not destructive of the authority of the gospels. To my mind, if anything, it encourages belief in the authority of those documents. This viewpoint, however, is impatient with a naive, uncritical approach to the gospels that views them as data banks containing so many pieces of information, all of the same character (like the gospels themselves, in this view), which can be assembled into one coherent whole that is then understood to be the essential equivalent of a videotape in written form. But in throwing a question mark against the straight one-to-one correspondence between the gospel narratives and the events of the first time frame, have we not weakened the reliability of the former? We have done so only if one holds to the above-mentioned uncritical view of the gospels. It is true that with regard to the issue of continuity we have to speak of degrees of probability. But since probability attaches to everything that is historical, it is not a word that the Christian need despise. Indeed our uncertainty about the extent of continuity through the three time frames is quite small, bearing only on a handful of passages, and it is more than compensated for by the confidence we have in the unique inspiration of the evangelists. We ought therefore to have no uncertainty concerning the authority of our gospels or the correctness of the interpretations of Jesus that they have given us.

VIII. POSTSCRIPT

Since this paper is directed to members of ETS, it is worth asking whether the

perspective presented here is compatible with the affirmation of the inerrancy of Scripture. The answer of course depends on the definition of inerrancy. If we take the rigid notion of inerrancy that Lindsell and others seem to espouse, the answer is “No.” If on the other hand we take the more nuanced view of inerrancy set forth in the Chicago Statement,³⁷ the answer is “Yes.” The fact that the gospels do not relate to exactly what happened in the first time frame as the written equivalent of a videotape does not mean the evangelists are guilty of “error” unless we know that that was what they intended to do. But if they deliberately present the story of Jesus, as they are now able to do, from the perspective of the post-resurrection Church, drawing out its significance by presenting history and theology together, they can hardly be judged as being in error. Indeed, as we have argued, their narratives are “truer” because of this.

Evangelicalism, as I see it, is the attempt to hold to authentic and Biblical (that is, orthodox) Christianity while being open to and entering into the world of scholarship and its methodologies. The evangelical of course cannot accept the vitiating and unsubstantiated presuppositions of modern scholarship. But there is also much truth in modern scholarship, as any reasonable person can see. And if the evangelical does not reach out and affirm the truth that is there, thus showing that the truth of scholarship is not necessarily inimical to the faith of orthodox Christianity, who will? This is the challenge that faces evangelicalism. The call to assume a reactionary stance and to reject the historical-critical method is a call to retreat to a closet fundamentalism—safe and secure, indeed, but out of touch with the real world and truly subject to the old cries of obscurantism. Evangelicals above all hold that truth is never to be feared, and they therefore pursue their calling with the confident expectation that the truth (not everything claimed) attainable by modern scholarship is fundamentally compatible with the truth of their faith. The fact that God has entered the historical process in his Son, Jesus Christ, means that evangelicals can never turn their backs on a reasonable and cautious Biblical criticism.³⁸

³⁷“The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” *JETS* 21/4 (1978) 289-296.

³⁸Since the subject of this paper was sparked by an earlier paper by R. H. Gundry, “Inspiration, Imprecision, Literary Genre and Matthew” (to appear in a forthcoming commentary on Matthew), some comments on his paper may be worthwhile. Although I am in basic agreement with Gundry, I am not happy with the suggestion that “dehistoricizing” of parts of the gospels is now necessary because at times the evangelists are not writing “as historians” and in the gospels we have a mixture of the historical and the unhistorical. This seems to me to be true only if one defines history as “bare facts.” If, on the other hand, we think of history as *Geschichte* (by which I mean fact combined with interpretation, meaning and significance, resulting in truth) rather than a bald *Historie*, the entire contents of the evangelists may be appropriately designated history. To my mind this is more likely to have been the understanding of the gospels by both their authors and readers than that they were consciously aware of, and would have admitted to, a distinction within the gospels between the historical and the unhistorical. In my view the gospels work freely and creatively with historical tradition, they mix theology and history together—but it is historical tradition with which they work and it is history that they theologize. Because of my convictions about the importance, the tenacity and the integrity of the Jesus tradition in the early Church I work with the presupposition that the evangelists always (or almost always?) have a historical core with which they begin and that constitutes the basis of what they narrate. (To return to the illustration used above, in my view you cannot have a replay if there was not a play in the first place—regardless of how different the replay may look by comparison.) Of course I cannot demonstrate this, but it squares best with the data as I see them. My differences with Gundry would appear to involve semantics more than matters of substance.