

THE GOSPELS: PORTRAITS OF JESUS AND HIS MINISTRY

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The changes in gospel studies during the past thirty years have been very subtle and remain far from pervasive within evangelical circles. The goal of this paper is twofold: to highlight the change in perspective regarding the gospels, and to underscore the significant implications of this change for three specific areas of Biblical theology vital to evangelical concerns.

I. THE CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE REGARDING THE GOSPELS

Recognizing the risk of oversimplification and acknowledging the ultimate breakdown of all analogies, one may cautiously depict the rather broad spectrum of gospel studies in terms of three artistic expressions: (1) the snapshot, (2) the portrait, and (3) the abstract painting. Each medium gives its own expression of reality. Yet each differs from the other in the respective treatment of that reality. Consequently one expects to find a descending degree of correspondence to reality in a snapshot, a portrait and an abstract painting. Yet all three media contain specific standards of reliability that are set by the parameters of each medium, standards by which the final product may be evaluated. In other words the existing criteria for determining a good or reliable snapshot differ greatly from the criteria for determining a good portrait or an abstract painting. Therefore in criticizing a work of art one must first take into consideration the medium and then apply the appropriate criteria for evaluation. To apply the analogy to gospel studies, the frequently avoided task of determining whether the gospels—any or all—represent snapshots, portraits, or abstract paintings of Jesus and his ministry directly conditions the task of evaluating the nature of the reliability of the documents.

1. *The Gospels as Snapshots.* For many centuries—some would say from the beginning—the gospels have been viewed as verbal snapshots of Jesus' ministry. Stemming from eyewitness reports and containing a rather detailed chronicle of Jesus' life and teaching, the gospels offer a "record" of Jesus' ministry, recording the work and words of Jesus with a precision not unlike that of the *Congressional Record*. As snapshots, the gospels' primary intention was to preserve for posterity a precise verbal picture of Jesus' life and teaching. Together the four gospels provide a solid basis for the construction of a life of Jesus in chronological and geographical sequence by means of harmonizing the similar and dissimilar elements. The natural consequence of such a perspective has been a series of gospel harmonies extending from Tatian's *Diatessaron* of the second century to Cheney's *The Life of Christ in Stereo*,¹ including such notable works as Augus-

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¹J. M. Cheney and S. A. Ellisen, *The Life of Christ in Stereo* (Portland: Western Baptist Seminary, 1969). Cf. the most recent harmony printed in parallel columns by R. L. Thomas and S. N. Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (Chicago: Moody, 1978).

tine's *De concensu evangelistarum libri quattuor* and Calvin's *Commentarii in harmoniam ex Matthaeo, Marco et Luca*.

2. *The Gospels as Abstract Paintings.* By contrast, since the Enlightenment in general and the work of Reimarus in particular the gospels have been considered by proponents of a more radical criticism to be akin to abstract paintings of Jesus and his ministry. Instead of offering a "record," a "historical account," or a "biography" of Jesus and his ministry, the gospels only relate abstractly to their subject by depicting more immediately the cult, religious experience and theology of the diverse communities within the developing Church. Consequently one must read the gospels as abstractions of Jesus' impact painted with the bold brush strokes of the synthesizing community of faith. As with an abstract painting, the direction of the gospels' message aims forward to the audience or viewer rather than backward to the original subject. With so little direct correspondence, then, between the Jesus of history and the Christ of the gospels, one looks to the gospels in vain for answers to specific questions about the Jesus of the past. The waves of Strauss in the nineteenth century, Wrede at the turn of the twentieth century, and Bultmann until our generation have dominated the sea of critical studies for over one hundred years.

Since the worlds of snapshots and abstract paintings are so totally diverse, no common bases or criteria have emerged in gospel studies among the proponents of either position. The theological, historical and literary a priori of the opposing perspectives have precluded any mutual understanding and have resulted in the one side's relegating the other to a status of incredibility at best and enemies of the faith at worst. Furthermore, the failure of the two views of the gospels to take each other seriously in any but a futile apologetic or polemical manner has eventuated in simplistic caricatures and the failure to make the necessary corrections of extremes on both sides.

Since the disparity between a snapshot and an abstract painting is much too vast to be reconciled by the data and since each view assumes its own position to be true and thus the other to be false, neither starting point has had the occasion or need to step back and ask if indeed the gospels were intended to be verbal snapshots or abstract paintings after all. Consequently the two perspectives on the gospels coexist today in antithetical parallelism with little or no possibility of any constructive interaction.

3. *The Gospels as Portraits.* A third perspective—the gospels as verbal portraits of Jesus and his ministry—stands and has stood in a mediating position between the gospels as snapshots and the gospels as abstract paintings. Acknowledging the validity of some of the historical and literary criticism stemming from post-Enlightenment Biblical studies, this viewpoint has conceded the impossibility of maintaining the gospels to be snapshots of Jesus and his ministry. Simultaneously, by finding a basic correspondence between the Jesus of history and the Christ of the gospels, this perspective has resisted the theological reductionism of radical criticism and rejected the conclusion that the gospels offer at best abstract paintings of Jesus and his ministry. Therefore while sharing some elements in common with the gospels seen both as snapshots and as abstract paintings, the gospels as portraits stand as a corrective to both extremes. In addition to Martin Kähler,² commentators like Meyer, Zahn, Schlatter, Schniewind and Taylor

²M. Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), translated from *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1892).

have represented over a century of gospel exposition from this perspective.

Of great significance for our particular interests comes the realization that most of the recent literature on the gospels from evangelical scholarship has treated the gospels as portraits rather than snapshots or abstract paintings of Jesus' ministry. Long before this current trend among evangelicals Ned Stonehouse,³ in his often overlooked seminal works on the gospels,⁴ explicitly referred to the gospels as "portraits"⁵ while denying that Mark (and Matthew and Luke by implication) was either a "chronicle" or a "biography."⁶ Stonehouse's rejection of the harmonization approach to the gospels,⁷ his disclaimer that the gospel writers employed a historical method typical of our day,⁸ and his bold emphasis on the distinctive witness of Matthew, Mark and Luke respectively to Jesus all signaled a major break among American evangelicals with the generally accepted view of the gospels as snapshots of Jesus and his ministry. No less significant than this break is the fact that Stonehouse himself stood in the direct line of Machen and Warfield. Unfortunately his work harbingered the era of Bornkamm, Marxsen, Conzelmann and redaction criticism remained without parallel in evangelical scholarship for nearly a generation. Within the last ten years, however, numerous works by evangelicals have appeared that concur with Stonehouse's emphases but also recognize and reflect a growing consensus that historical and literary criticism are necessary tools for gospel exegesis.

Of the four gospels, Mark's has received the greatest attention. One of the first works in this new wave was Robert Meye's *Jesus and the Twelve*,⁹ which focused on the evangelist's portrait of Jesus as teacher and the twelve as disciples to underscore the revelatory character of Jesus' ministry with his disciples. In 1973 Ralph Martin¹⁰ surveyed the recent spate of books on Mark and offered the suggestion that Mark wrote to emphasize apologetically Jesus' true humanity, to encourage a persecuted community by pointing to the inevitability of suffering for the obedient disciple who shared the fellowship of the Messiah, and to press home the task of the Gentile mission. William Lane¹¹ offers a full-scale commentary from this perspective, while Gilbert Bilezikian's 1977 monograph focuses primarily on the literary context of Mark's gospel.¹²

³See M. Silva, "Ned B. Stonehouse and Redaction Criticism," *WTJ* 40 (1978) 77-88, 281-303.

⁴N. B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of Matthew and Mark to Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Guardian, 1944) and *The Witness of Luke to Christ* (London: Tyndale, 1951). In a similar vein see M. C. Tenney, *The Genius of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

⁵Stonehouse, *Luke*, 5-6.

⁶Idem, *Matthew and Mark*, 6-7, 83.

⁷Idem, *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 109.

⁸Idem, *Matthew and Mark*, 84.

⁹R. Meye, *Jesus and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

¹⁰R. Martin, *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973).

¹¹W. Lane, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

¹²G. Bilezikian, *The Liberated Gospel: A Comparison of the Gospel of Mark and Greek Tragedy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977). Among the numerous articles involving Markan theology the work of R. Stein—

Meanwhile, Luke's gospel has received similar examination. First, Earle Ellis broke the ice by suggesting that the evangelists were "concerned to interpret and transmit the traditions in the light of their understanding of Messiah's message and of the needs of their readers."¹³ I. Howard Marshall¹⁴ stressed the third evangelist's dual role as historian and theologian. On the one hand, the evangelist was free to rework his sources and give us a "picture of Jesus. . . different from that in the sources but. . . unmistakably the same Jesus."¹⁵ On the other hand, the evangelist underscored and developed the theology of salvation inherent in his sources and stemming from the core of Jesus' ministry. Marshall's work on Luke has now culminated in a major commentary.¹⁶

Matthean studies in the same vein are more embryonic, consisting mainly of articles in professional journals.¹⁷ The one exception has been the work of Robert Gundry,¹⁸ who now has an extensive commentary on Matthew awaiting publication. Despite the lack of monographs on Matthew the theological character of Matthew's portrait both Christologically and ecclesologically has long been recognized in Biblical studies. The same situation exists with the fourth gospel. The more detailed analyses done by evangelicals of John's portrait have appeared in journal studies.¹⁹ Leon Morris clearly speaks about the evangelist's "depicting" Jesus and the resultant "portrait," especially in comparison with the synoptics.²⁰

From the broader field of NT introduction, works by Barker, Lane and Michaels and by Ralph Martin have set the gospels within the context of "portraits."²¹ Marshall's *New Testament Interpretation*²² contains six essays devoted to the critical tools of religious, historical, source, form, tradition and redaction criticism necessary for exegeting the gospels in view of their complex background

¹³Redaktionsgeschichtlich Investigation of a Markan Seam (Mc 1:21f)," *ZNW* 61 (1970) 70-94; "What is Redaktionsgeschichte?," *JBL* 88 (1969) 45-56; and "The Proper Methodology for Ascertaining a Markan Redaction History," *NovT* 13 (1971) 181-198—is fundamental.

¹⁴E. Ellis, *the Gospel of Luke* (rev. ed.; London: Oliphants, 1974) 9.

¹⁵I. H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971).

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁷*Idem*, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

¹⁸E.g., R. Michaels, "Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles: A Study of Matthew 25:31-46," *JBL* 84 (1965) 27-37; R. A. Guelich, "The Antitheses of Matthew v. 21-48: Traditional and/or Redactional," *NTS* 22 (1975-76) 444-457; G. Osborne, "Redaction Criticism and the Great Commission: A Case Study Toward a Biblical Understanding of Inerrancy," *JETS* 19 (1976) 73-85.

¹⁹R. Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in Saint Matthew's Gospel* (SNT 18; Leiden: Brill, 1967).

²⁰E.g., S. Smalley, "Diversity and Development in John," *NTS* 17 (1970-71) 276-292; R. Michaels, "The Temple Discourse in John," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* (ed. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 200-213.

²¹L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).

²²G. Barker, W. Lane and R. Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks* (New York: Harper, 1969); R. Martin, *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students* (Vol. 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

²³I. H. Marshall, *New Testament Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

and purposes. This rather belated acceptance of the results of gospel criticism and the consequences in any but a token manner first occurred once again in Stonehouse's work.²³ But it was F. F. Bruce in 1970²⁴ who actually set forth for evangelicals the state of the art in gospel studies for the first time in all boldness.

This turn of events in gospel studies by evangelicals reflects in no fashion a mere accommodation to "scholarship" or a faddish desire to mimic the more radical criticism. The stature of men like Stonehouse and Bruce, not to mention others, dispels any such suspicions. Rather, this new thrust among evangelicals emerges from a gradual recognition of the valid claims of Biblical scholarship for the nature, background and development of the gospels. Furthermore, even more persuasive has been the recognition by contemporary evangelicals of the Biblical evidence itself related to the nature and intent of the gospels.

First of all, the presence of four distinctive gospels demands that each be taken seriously with its own divinely inspired message. Harmonization that obliterates the distinctiveness of the four gospels in the interest of reconstructing the life and teaching of Jesus can actually distort the plain meaning of the text. To read the four gospels as an unscrambled *Diatessaron* misses the genius of having four distinct gospels.

Second, the gospels themselves stand out as a unique literary genre.²⁵ John 20:31 explicitly states that the fourth gospel was written to engender faith, a "witness" (21:24) of faith in the person and work of Christ rendered to effect faith.²⁶ Some have persuasively argued that Mark's gospel first offered the literary name "gospel" for this new genre, an appellation determined by the document's content (Mark 1:1, 14). It is certainly not without significance that these writings went without the usual titles of the ancient literary world such as *bioi* (cf. Plutarch's *Lives*), *praxeis* ("Acts of. . ."), or *apomnēmoneumata* (cf. Xenophon's *Memoirs*). Rather, they came to be known at some point in the second century as the "gospel according to" Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.²⁷ Their literary form and identity derive from their content—namely, the Christian message of good news expressed in the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

Third, along with the explicit statement of Luke's prologue (Luke 1:2), a close comparison of the gospels reveals that the evangelists clearly used material preserved as tradition. Such use of tradition raises the question of the sources behind the gospels (source criticism). The tradition itself was doubtlessly preserved and presented initially in oral form in the Church's preaching and teaching. Such a context raises the question of the manner or form used to shape and transmit the tradition (form criticism). Furthermore, the route from a setting in Jesus' ministry to the written gospel involved numerous stages and settings, some of which have doubtless left their marks on the materials. Such a route for the tradition raises the question of the history of the tradition prior to and including the con-

²³N. B. Stonehouse, *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963).

²⁴F. F. Bruce, *Tradition: Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

²⁵Cf. R. H. Gundry, "Recent Investigations into the Literary Genre 'Gospel,'" in Longenecker and Tenney, eds., *New Dimensions*, 97-114.

²⁶C. Schneider, "martyrs," *TDNT* 4 (1967) 499-500; Barker, Lane and Michaels, *New Testament*, 64-65.

²⁷Justin Martyr, *Apology* 66, cf. 67.3; *Dialogue* 100.4.

text of the evangelists (tradition history). Finally, the evangelists have obviously selected, rearranged, reworked and even reworded the tradition²⁸ while shaping their own inspired portrait of Jesus and his ministry. Such a composition raises the question of the redactional intention and motifs of the evangelists (redaction criticism).

Without doubt, therefore, a consensus about the nature and content of the gospels has emerged among evangelical scholars. This consensus has grown out of the Biblical evidence and the unavoidable conclusions of critical scholarship. But the consensus is shared primarily by those who have worked extensively in the gospels themselves. The evangelical scene at large—including lay people, pastors, colleagues in other theological disciplines, and even some in Biblical studies—still operates on the basis of the gospels' being essentially verbal snapshots whose red-letter editions highlight the very words of Jesus. This difference in perspective regarding the gospels among evangelicals has led²⁹ and will continue to lead to serious tension, since the standards of precision and the criteria of reliability applying to snapshots do not necessarily apply to portraits and vice versa. One way of relieving the tension is to deal with the issue by continuing to produce solid exegetical studies in the gospels, studies employing all of the critical tools. Ultimately, however, one must address the direct implications of the gospels taken as theological portraits.

II. IMPLICATIONS FOR BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

The implications of the gospels as portraits of Jesus and his ministry most affect the areas of Christology, NT theology, and the evangelical doctrine of inspiration.

1. *The Jesus of History and the Christ of the Gospels.* If indeed the gospels offer portraits rather than snapshots, one of the primary concerns falls in the fundamental area of Christology—more specifically, the Jesus-of-history-and-Christ-of-faith question. What assurance do we have that the gospel portraits correspond to the reality of Jesus and his ministry? Asked differently, how free was the evangelist to modify the tradition in order to paint his verbal portrait? The answer to these and related questions must stem from the analysis of the evidence and the new awareness of the nature and intent of the gospels.

Some evangelical scholars might find these questions inappropriate, since the gospels even as portraits were divinely inspired products and ultimately stand as our infallible authority for Jesus and his ministry. To be sure, evangelicals do start with the commitment to the divinely inspired and thus reliable character of the gospels. But if the gospels are portraits and not snapshots, evangelicals can no longer assume a priori that the Jesus of history and the Christ of the gospels are one and the same without examining the data available, including not only the gospels as finished products but also the traditional process extending from Jesus' ministry up to the written gospel.

This examination of the data is necessary for several reasons. First, the reli-

²⁸Note N. Stonehouse's demonstration of same in his careful discussion of the pericope of the "Rich Young Ruler" in *Origins*, 93-112, esp. 108-112.

²⁹Cf., e.g., remarks by J. W. Montgomery, "Whither Biblical Inerrancy," *Christianity Today* 21 (1977) 40-42, and compare the essays in Thomas and Gundry, *Harmony*, 265-337.

ability or trustworthiness of the Biblical witness depends on such an examination. If any evangelist has distorted rather than reliably portrayed Jesus and his ministry, then our assumption about the reliability of Scripture based on Scripture's claim begs the ultimate question about the nature and authority of the written word. Whereas some might hold to the infallibility of Scripture in spite of solid evidence to the contrary by simply suspending judgment or avoiding the question, most scholars could not. Scholarly integrity and Christian faith cannot be at odds if truth is one. Second, the very nature of Biblical revelation consisting of deed and word³⁰ compels one to examine the historical events behind the written portrait in order to insure that the portrait results from the bringing together of deed and word—that is, a verbal portrait of Jesus and his ministry and not merely a docetic word divorced from concrete events in history. Third, an exegesis that seeks first to establish what the text actually said in its milieu requires such a look at the data. An examination of the correspondence between the portrait and the subject helps clarify the artist's intentions found in the impressions left by the portrait. A reliable portrait adequately conveys a valid impression about the subject. But knowing the artist (the tendencies of the evangelist), his materials (his use of tradition), and his subject as perceived by others (the tradition and other gospels) enables us to appreciate more fully and to comprehend more accurately the artist's (evangelist's) "message" inherent in the portrait. In other words a detailed study of the evangelist's portrait and its background promises a greater understanding of the evangelist's statement about who Jesus was and helps prevent one from subjectively distorting the portrait by one's own preconceptions.

Since the reliability of the Scriptures, the nature of Biblical revelation, and the task of exegesis require that one carefully examine the relationship of the Jesus of history and the Christ of the gospels, evangelicals of all Biblical scholars should be most involved in the question. But how do we proceed? First, evangelicals must recognize and accept the basic principle of gospel studies—namely, that the evangelists used tradition to formulate their portrait of Jesus. Consequently one must seek to reach behind the evangelists. Second, evangelicals must recognize and admit that if the evangelists selected, shaped, arranged, reworked and even reworded the tradition, the early Church most likely did the same with the oral tradition. Consequently one must seek to reach behind the early Church. Third, fully aware of the narrow limitations of the critical tools for discovering the *ipsissima vox* if not the *ipsissima verba*, evangelicals must cautiously use the formal and material criteria³¹ of gospel studies to assist in developing their perception of Jesus and his ministry. Such a perception will by definition be minimal and vague. But since the Jesus and his teaching behind the gospels does not become a canon within a canon to interpret the gospels themselves, this perception of the Jesus of history can remain rather minimal and vague as long as it is clear enough to set alongside the respective gospel's portrait to confirm or deny

³⁰Cf. G. E. Ladd, "The Saving Acts of God," in *Basic Christian Doctrines* (ed. C. F. H. Henry; New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1962).

³¹See R. N. Longenecker's "Literary Criteria in Life of Jesus Research: An Evaluation and Proposal," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* (ed. G. F. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 217-229; R. Barbour, *Tradition-historical Criticism of the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 1972).

the portrait's reliability. Finally, should the results of the analysis and comparison prove positive in the passages where comparison between Jesus and the evangelist's portrait is possible, one can then move with confidence into the less obvious areas. In other words, if the evangelists do not distort but reliably portray Jesus and his ministry where one can control the data, one might logically assume that the same factors controlling his portrait in these areas remained at work in the areas that one cannot analyze by virtue of the minimal character of the methodology.

As evangelicals we have both reason and means to explore the implications of recent gospel studies for the Christology of the gospels. We must now get on with the task.

2. *The Gospels and New Testament Theology.* The second implication of the gospels' being portraits pertains to the discipline of Biblical theology in general. Since one of the essential tasks of Biblical theology consists in a descriptive statement of the respective theology of a Biblical document or writer and since the respective gospels present their own individual portrait of Jesus, we can no longer treat them as one in developing a theology of the NT. In the past the gospels—especially the synoptics—have been treated *en bloc* as though they merely reflected Jesus' ministry. In other words a description of the theology of the gospels was synonymous with Jesus' theology, since the synoptics were essentially records of Jesus' ministry. Occasionally John's gospel received its own due because of its distinctive character. Yet the singling out of Johannine theology to accompany Pauline theology only highlights the apparent homogeneity of the synoptic gospels.

Evangelical scholars, however, need not despair of including a theology of Jesus in spite of the portrait character of the gospels. Since the basis of all NT theology rests on the person and work of Jesus rather than the Church's Easter faith and since the gospels do preserve tradition rooted in Jesus' ministry, a study of the the gospels and their background as noted above would lead to a delineation of Jesus and his ministry with which one must begin NT theology. Although we must recognize the impossibility of writing a detailed history of the life and teaching of Jesus, we do have a very adequate basis in the tradition for formulating a basic perception of Jesus and his teaching. With this basic perception as a starting point, we then should turn to the respective evangelist's use of the tradition in order to shape his own portrait of Jesus' ministry. John's theological portrait was hardly more intentional than Matthew's, Mark's or Luke's.

An additional bonus accruing from the analysis of the gospels in order to gain a perspective on Jesus as well as the individual evangelist includes the theological thumbprints left on the tradition during the process of the Church's own use of the tradition prior to the evangelists' usage. From these adaptations and applications of the tradition by the Church we gain insight into the developing community, insight that supplements our understanding of the emerging Church that comes from other NT writings. Therefore the gospels as portraits contribute valuable information regarding not only the theology of the evangelists but also of Jesus and the early Church.

3. *The Gospels as Portraits and the Inspiration of Scripture.* The third implication of the gospels as portraits relates to the doctrine of inspiration. The crucial issue among evangelicals today does not involve the fact of divine inspiration but the nature and extent of infallibility and inerrancy. This issue becomes critical in

the difference between the gospels as snapshots and the gospels as portraits. To say that a snapshot is completely reliable is not the same as saying that a portrait is totally reliable or that an abstract painting is reliable to the same degree, since each in its own way may be totally reliable. Neither the information gained nor the standards used for determining the reliability of the snapshot, portrait and abstract painting is the same. Whereas a portrait seeks to convey an impression, create an aura, develop a perception, the snapshot seeks to capture the scene, the episode, the details in order to freeze them for all time to see as they were. To expect or demand the same reliability and information from a portrait as from a snapshot is to assume illegitimately that the details function in the same manner for both.

Those who define infallible and inerrant in terms of the gospels as snapshots not only have insurmountable problems in dealing with the gospels as they stand but are actually demanding more of the texts than they intended to give. Thus while seeking to protect a high view of Scripture and an orthodox view of inspiration such proponents distort the message and intention of the inspired authors by understanding the evangelists to be saying something they were not.

Once again it was Ned Stonehouse who warned against seeking a "pedantic precision" in the gospels rather than an "accurate and trustworthy *impression* of the Lord's teaching."³² He bases his views on the teaching of "leading Reformed theologians" including Warfield and Hodge, who wrote, "There is a vast difference between exactness of statement. . . and accuracy. . . which secures the correct statement of facts or principles *intended to be affirmed*."³³ The infallibility and inerrancy of the gospels' text does not depend on our preconception of what the text says but rather on the setting and intention of the author.

Doubtless this awareness underlies the qualifications of the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* in #13 of the "Articles of Affirmation and Denial"³⁴ and the qualification in the Exposition under the paragraph on "Infallibility, Inerrancy, Interpretation."³⁵ Yet there remains much to be spelled out in detail with reference to the materials of the gospels. One conclusion is certain: Evangelicals have only begun to deal with the complex consequences of understanding the gospels as portraits rather than snapshots. But the rewards of such are great, not least of which is a renewed acquaintance and appreciation of the good news of Jesus, the Son of God, as portrayed for us by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

³²Stonehouse, *Origins*, 109-110 (italics mine).

³³Ibid., 110 n. 17 (italics mine).

³⁴"We deny that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose."

³⁵"Differences between *literary conventions* in Bible times and in ours must be observed: since, for instance, non-chronological narration and imprecise citation were conventional and acceptable and violated no expectations in those days, we must not regard these things as faults when we find them in Bible writers. When *total precision of a particular kind* was not expected nor aimed at, it is no error not to have achieved it. Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claim and achieving that *measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed*" (italics mine).