

## BIBLE STUDY

# THE EMERGENCE OF THE WRITTEN GOSPELS

By

**Bernard J. LeFrois, S.V.D.**

Christ the Lord commissioned his Apostles to "go forth into the whole world and proclaim the Good News to all creation" (Mk. 16:15). This commission was given around the year 30 A.D. and for fully thirty years, if not more, the oral proclamation of the Good News held sway before any of our four written Greek gospels, as we have them today, came into existence. The oral preaching or kerygma can best be described as "the solemn and public proclamation of salvation in Christ made in the name of God to non-Christians; it was accompanied by an appeal to signs and wonders to dispose the hearers to faith, conversion and a return to God" (New Cath. Encyclopedia, 8: 167).

### CONTENT OF THE ORAL KERYGMA

In the Act of the Apostles St. Luke gives a digest form of the oral kerygma in the early days of the believing community by placing it on the lips of Peter in five chapters: 2: 22-41; 3: 12-26; 4: 10-12; 5: 30-31; 10: 34-43. From these passages it can be gleaned that the oral kerygma in its early form contained the following chief focal points:

- 1) Christ's mission was divine, proved by miracles, witnessed by many.
- 2) His passion and death, also witnessed by many, were according to the divine plan.
- 3) He is risen from the dead, for the Apostles themselves are witness to this; and his exaltation at God's right hand with the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit, manifested him as Messiah-King and Lord of all.
- 4) At the restoration of all things in the consummation he will come as judge of the living and the dead.

- 5) To obtain remission of sins and the gift of the Spirit, there is need of a change of heart (*metanoia*) and an external rite (baptism), which would give one entrance to the believing community.

From the first few chapters of Acts it can be seen how this dynamic message took the audience by storm, moved also as it undoubtedly was by the inner working of the Holy Spirit bearing witness to the Risen Lord. It was only to be expected that the neophytes would seek to know more about the person and message of Jesus, and began an all-out search for his words and deeds.

### DEVELOPMENT OF THE ORAL KERYGMA

In the five focal points of the oral kerygma one can already perceive the broad outlines of the written gospels, granted that the first point is developed far more than the others because of its nature and content. How did the oral kerygma develop into the written gospels? The School of Form Criticism, whose chief exponent is Bultmann, maintains that oral proclamation tends to follow certain set patterns of expression. At first separate units were gathered and circulated, such as the death-resurrection account, the passion account, the miracle stories, sayings (*logia*) of Jesus, controversial encounters, parables, and several other units. Each of these developed its own peculiar "form" of expression which eventually came to be written down, first as separate units and finally as a composite whole. (For fuller treatment, see Bol. Ecl. Feb. 1975, 131-136) The Lutheran Scandinavian School (Stendahl) is rather of the opinion that from the very start there was concentrated work and planned procedure in presenting the kerygma, perhaps along the lines of the five focal points delineated by St. Luke and placed on the lips of Peter, as mentioned above.

At any rate, the oral preachers or evangelists did not merely learn the message by heart and hand it down in a stereotype form. Every preacher will employ all the oratorical skill at his disposal to bring home his message, and thus the finished form would somewhat differ, accordingly as the abilities and insights of the preachers differed. Then, too, the kerygma was a living message. It had great potential. As Vatican II points out clearly (Divine Revelation, no. 19), the bearers of the message pondered it and presented it in the light of the Easter events and under the enlightenment of the Spirit they had been given in order to bear witness to Christ (Jn. 15:26-27). They thus penetrated the deeper meaning of the words and the significance of the deeds of Jesus, incorporating it into their preaching so that it became an organic whole. Certain situations and existential problems cropped up also in the commu-

nities with mentalities differing from their own, and this demanded an application of the words of Jesus to meet those situations. With the Spirit's guidance this was done and likewise incorporated into their instructions, which were catechetical in nature, or molded to meet the needs of liturgical services.

Thus it is evident that there is **development in the kerygma**, like a tree develops from the seed which carries all the potential of the tree. It was expanded as time went on and circumstances demanded it, the salvific meaning of the words and deeds of Jesus brought out more clearly and heightened by added explanations, all of which became part of the oral kerygma and later on of the written gospels.

### THE WRITTEN GOSPEL

From the foregoing it ought to be clear that the written gospels are not a sort of chronicle or a mere historical account of the words and deeds of Jesus, handed down as a static dead letter announcement. They emerged only after several decades of development of the kerygma and evidently contain much theology on the salvific deeds of Jesus.

Another factor must also be taken into account: the respective authors (or schools) of the written gospels were no mere stenographers recording the oral kerygma, no mere compilers of oral and written sources. They are true authors in the fullest sense of the word, writing their composition with a very definite purpose of their own in mind (which was different in each individual case) drawing on materials on hand or obtained through interviews, and molding all this to fit their planned purpose and to suit the audience for whom they were writing. They manifested decidedly creative ability in their presentation, each one unique in his own way even though one may depend on another for his material in many instances (cf. Bol. Ecl. Jan. 1975, 48-49).

Vatican II has adopted the best of modern scholarship in this matter. "The sacred authors wrote the four gospels — 1) selecting things from the many which had been handed down by word of mouth or in writing, 2) reducing some to a synthesis, 3) expliciting some things in view of the situation of their churches, 4) and preserving the form of proclamation, but always in such a fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus" (Divine Revelation, no. 19). Note well that mention is made of a selecting. So each evangelist (or what is more exact, each school representing the main author) chose what best suited the purpose of the writing, using

both written and oral sources. As an example, our present Greek Matthew in all likelihood incorporated the substance of an existant Aramaic Matthew (which has not come down to us), utilizing much material from Mark (which preceded the Greek Matthew), incorporating much likewise from another source (common to both Matthew and Luke), and also making use of oral traditions such as the basic historical substance of the infancy narratives.

Another example of selection and arrangement of material is found in the "Sermon on the Mount" (Mt. 5-7). Though this "sermon" may well embody basic points of a typical discourse used by Jesus in his various commitments in the towns he visited, yet it contains much more. Matthew has drawn on material which belongs to other parts of the public life of Jesus, for we find the same material in another context scattered throughout the gospel of Luke, and sometimes even repeated in Matthew (as Mt. 5:32 and 19:9). In the "sermon on the mount" Matthew has a definite purpose in concentrating the material in his first of five discourses, for there Christ is shown to be the great Teacher and the true Moses.

The arrangement of the material of the public life of Jesus in Matthew and Mark (and also Luke, if "Galilee" is the correct reading instead of "Judea" in 4, 44) is a striking example of total disregard of chronological sequence of events and arrangement according to a definite plan. In general it follows the same pattern: after baptism and temptation, only the Galilean ministry is set forth. The Judean and Jerusalem ministry is not touched upon till toward the end of the public life. But from John's gospel, it is clear that Jesus came to Jerusalem several times, and that even at the outset there was a Judean ministry. Today scholars offer as a plausible solution a symbolic sequence of events for theological purposes. The Galilean ministry symbolizes Christ's initial success (wherever it took place) in his preaching of the Kingdom. When his real message, which is deeply spiritual and challenging, fails to take hold, he is depicted as withdrawing from Galilee, to symbolize his withdrawing from the people at large and concentrating more intensively on the preparation of the Twelve who would be the foundation stones of the Kingdom in its earthly phase. The Judean ministry would then symbolize the opposition of the leaders of Israel (with Jerusalem their stronghold) which led finally to consummation through death and resurrection. John's plan is quite different: his is the dramatic self-revelation of the Person and role

of the Messiah, Son of God, and he arranges his material accordingly, not necessarily in chronological order either (though that opinion held for a long time). Every new journey to Jerusalem, the cultic center of Israel, intensifies this manifestation of Christ's person.

An example of reducing some things to a synthesis would be the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi (Mt. 16:16). In Mk. 8:29, the earliest witness to this scene, Peter professes only the Messiahship of Jesus, and this is also the tenor of Lk. 9:20. But Matthew uses a double title: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." If this is only a profession of Messiahship of Jesus, these words are tautological. But if it is also a profession of Christ's divinity, it is difficult to understand how Peter could have completely disregarded it at the time of the Passion. A more satisfying solution is to assume that the author is synthesizing (telescoping) two scenes into one: Peter's profession of messiahship at Caesarea, and the profession of the divine Sonship after the resurrection, when the Risen Christ had manifested to them the depth of his personality. Matthew, writing many decades after the events, could well combine both and the structure of his gospel bears this out, for from chapter 14 to 17 he has no less than seven indications of the divine personality of Christ. (Compare 14:32; 15:13; 16:16; 16-17; 16:27; 17:5).

A further example of synthesis is the sixth chapter of St. John where the author seems to have combined into one long discourse several discussions on the same topic stretched over several Sabbaths. He developed his theme by the well-known Semitic technique of concentric waves of thought, interweaving discussion on the Bread of Life with a secondary theme, the need of faith to accept Jesus for what he really is. Other examples of synthesis are found in the bringing together of two parables of the Lord and treating them as one, for the sake of brevity, or because of a close relation of one to the other, as Mt. 22:1-10 the wedding feast and the following verses 11-14 the wedding garment. To telescope two events into one as in the case of miracles, denies nothing of their historicity, and the purpose of the author (theological, catechetical), may well be brought out better by this technique.

"The sacred writers explicate some things in view of the situation in their churches": Mt. 5:32 is a good example of this. In Luke's parallel text (16:18) the statement on divorce is clear. Matthew seems at first to be giving one exception, but to make an exception would be to destroy the weight of Jesus' argument which can be

seen in the proper context of the statement (Mt. 19: 1-9). The phrase "except on the grounds of unchastity" is best explained if we take them not as the very words of Jesus, but as an explanatory solution to certain marriage cases in the Early Church. They were not considered binding because the Synagogue also held them as not binding.

Of importance is the final sentence of the wording of Vatican II: "they preserved the form of proclamation, but always in such a fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus." This latter is clearly a departure from Bultmann's contention that the Early Church invented the miracles and other things attributed to Jesus, such as his resurrection, ascension and Parousia. "Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held and continues to hold that the four Gospels faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation, until the day he was taken up into heaven" (no. 19). Thus, the Evangelists did not invent his deeds or his message. However, in proclaiming that message and those deeds, they have developed it, amplified it along the lines mentioned above. They used any kind of literary techniques or presentation that best brought out the message, such as symbolic presentation of the matter, dialogue composition, question and answer technique, and the like. The message is that of Christ, the deeds are those of Christ. The way this message and those deeds are proclaimed either orally or in writing, is the contribution of the evangelists of both the oral and the written gospels.

That is why the same document on Divine Revelation (no. 18) states: "The four Gospels are 1) the principle witness of the life and teaching of the Incarnate Word, 2) they are of apostolic origin, 3) they are the foundation of the faith, 4) they bear witness to the apostolic faith as preached." Hence, the gospels are documents of the faith. They were never intended to be a mere chronicle of the life of Jesus nor just a narrative account of his words and deeds. They are written to deepen the faith, handing on faithfully what Jesus did and said. However, the Council Fathers were careful not to state in what manner or in what literary form this was done. They merely state it to be in the form of proclamation, leaving to scholars to study further how the deeds of Jesus are presented to make them easier to grasp and acceptable to all minds. They are convinced that these deeds are not always presented in a historical narrative style.

Since our written gospels are complex literary compositions and have been put into writing only after a longer development of the oral kerygma, one is justified in speaking of three levels of interpretation. The first or top level would be the meaning of the words and deeds of Jesus which the Evangelist wanted to utilize for his precise purpose. At times it could be that angle of the message of Jesus which suited the author's purpose at a given moment. The second level of interpretation would be the same words or deeds of Jesus with the interpretation given by the oral evangelists in the long development of the oral proclamation. Since the words and deeds of Jesus are capable of many nuances, that angle of the message was chosen which suited the audience on a given occasion. Thus, the explanation of the parable of the sower in Mt. 13:18-23 would be the allegorical meaning which the preachers presented to their audiences when the parable in Mt. 13:1-9 no longer had the Jewish audience that Jesus had before him when he spoke the parable. This first meaning of the parable represents the third level of interpretation, which Jesus intended for his Jewish audience namely, that despite many obstacles to a good harvest for the Kingdom of God, the disciples need not be disheartened, for there will be an abundant harvest after all. Thus at times, the gospel words are capable of having more than one interpretation according to the level of interpretation one keeps in mind.

### THE GOSPEL DEMYTHOLOGIZED

The name most associated with demythologization is that of Rudolph Bultmann, though subsequent authors have developed it further. He wanted the Bible to be relevant for his contemporaries, and asked whether the New Testament has an answer for human existence in today's modern scientific (cybernetic) world. Yes, he answered, it is relevant. It has the answer, but it is in the language of myth.

According to present-day scholars, myth is the symbolic expression of belief of a people, which is difficult to express clearly, and hence resort is had to popular expression, picture language, story-form and the like. The symbolic and myth-language must be stripped away so as to arrive at the core of the matter. The core of the matter for the gospels is the Christ-event. Only the Christ-event has made man's existence meaningful and shown him what its fulfillment is. Man is confronted by this Christ-event in the proclamation of the kerygma, and this compels him to come

to a personal decision. If he accepts the kerygma, he gives meaning to his existence. Thus, in existential language, it is an encounter which issues in an authentic commitment.

Is this acceptable? As stated above, it is acceptable, and in this sense one can state that there is myth in the gospels, because the belief of the Early Church is often expressed in popular form, symbolic language and at times story-form. Yet, Vatican II has consistently avoided the expression, lest it mislead. The reason for this is Bultmann's further claims. From his studies in form criticism Bultmann came to the conclusion that we know next to nothing about the historical Jesus. He distinguishes the Jesus of history from the Christ of the Early Church's faith. What is mentioned in the gospels of Jesus' miracles, resurrection, ascension, parousia, are all inventions of the Early Church's nascent faith, and hence must be demythologized in order to understand the real message of the author. But, according to Bultmann, it is not important if they are realities or not, since the personal decision of the individual comes from his confrontation with the proclamation (kerygma), regardless of the historical reality of that which is proclaimed.

Not only did Vatican II in the above-mentioned quotation (no. 19) take a definite stand against this, stating clearly that the four gospels faithfully hand on what Jesus really did and taught until the day he was taken up into heaven, but many present-day scholars have also rejected Bultmann's claims. R. Marle (Introd. to Hermeneutics, 47f and 59f) asks pointedly how the Cross can be the decisive event unless there be something unique about the person who died on the cross. It is Christ who saves, not the proclamation about him. The document on Divine Revelation (no. 17) also refers to the resurrection and ascension of Jesus as realities to which the New Testament stands as a perpetual and divine witness (Cf. A. Dulles, *Myth, Biblical Revelation and Christ*, Corpus Books, 1969, 34.40-44).

Description of Christ's resurrection, ascension, Parousia as well as the descent of the Holy Spirit can be said to be the language of myth, but this in no wise detracts from the essential content of the realities contained in those descriptions. The essential point of the resurrection appearances is not the description of the Risen Christ, but the fact that Jesus of Nazareth who had died and was



buried was truly risen and was a living personality, known and recognized by his own Apostles and by many others who saw him as the Risen One in their midst. The essential point of the ascension description is not whether Christ rose up from the ground and was soon hidden by the clouds (which may well be Luke's manner of describing the essential point) but the fact that Jesus was with the Father and would no longer be visible to their sight. The rising of Jesus from the ground could signify his exaltation in glory. The essential point of the Pentecost event is not whether various phenomena like the sound of wind, the fire and the tongues were visible, but that the Spirit himself was given to the believing community who himself is Fire and Might and Witness to Christ. The essential point of the Parousia is not the apocalyptic descriptions of that event but the fact that the God-Man will come in glory as Judge of the living and the dead to hand over the kingdom to the Father.

We demythologize when we penetrate behind the symbolism and the "myth" language to the reality within. But we destroy the kerygma entirely when we empty it of its very salvific content. We must learn to distinguish the reality from the garment in which it is presented, and then apply the age-old task of bringing the gospel message up to the date by clothing its realities in language suitable for our age:

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\*Further References: J. McKenzie, "Bultmann and the Bible" in *Vital Concepts of the Bible*, p. 133ff; H. Schlier, *The Relevance of the New Testament*, 76-93. B. Ahern, C.P., *The Gospels in the Light of Modern Research*, in "Contemporary New Testament Studies, 131-138.