

# **The Gospel**

Studies in the Proclamation of the Good News

by

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## Preface

The common testimony of Christians is that the gospel changes lives. For me, this is doubly true. Although I put my faith in Christ at the early age of seven, in my late 20s I was thoroughly reformed by the gospel. I had been reared in a rigid Pentecostal tradition which had as its *lingua franca* the absolute necessity of glossolalia, a theology of baptismal regeneration based upon the formula in Acts 2:38, and a christology similar to Sabellianism. Not until my late 20s was I able to take an objective look at my heritage in light of the gospel, and when I did, the results radically changed my life for the second time.

At the time, I was the Dean at a small Pentecostal college in Jackson, Mississippi. For some months during 1978-79 I had become increasingly disturbed by the hermeneutical blunders of my mother church. At the same time, I was loyal, and I determined that while their conclusions must surely be true, I was obliged to find a better hermeneutical footing for these conclusions through the use of sound theological method. In this theological search, I discovered that using a sound method meant that one simply could not come to the conclusions with which I had been reared. Without ever having discussed theology with an evangelical, I became one. I remember well the day that I taught my class in early Pauline letters. I was exegesis the latter part of Chapter 2 in Paul's letter to the Galatians, when it dawned upon me that if what Paul said was true, much of what I had inherited as the gospel was simply not true. Standing in front of the class, I began to cry.

Today, many years later, that same passage still drives me. The fact that I have been crucified with Christ means that when Jesus died, I was somehow involved. Something happened at Calvary, historically, that all of my experience and theologizing could not improve upon—and today I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me. I live by faith in God's Son, who loved me and gave himself for me. And this is truly good news!

My departure from Pentecostalism was difficult because of the tremendous sociological and economic attachments. I bear no quarrel with Pentecostals, nor do I require of them the same action I took. At the same time, for me at least, the decision for the evangelical faith was as critical as that first commitment to Christ

at the age of seven. The gospel was truly liberating, and may I ever serve to guard its freedom!

Preface.....	2
Jesus in the Gospels .....	8
The Writing of the Four Gospels .....	8
Gospel Emphases.....	9
Gospel of Luke .....	10
Gospel Relationships .....	12
The Basic Chronology of the Life of Jesus .....	13
The Life and Ministry of Jesus .....	14
The Words of Jesus.....	14
The Teachings of Jesus.....	14
The Acts of Jesus .....	16
The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus.....	17
Jesus' Self-Understanding of His Passion.....	17
The Catalyst That Provoked Jesus' Death.....	17
The Days of Opposition.....	17
The Last Supper .....	18
The Arrest in Gethsemane .....	18
The Hearing and Trial.....	18
The Crucifixion.....	19
The Resurrection.....	19
The Apostolic Preaching of the Gospel .....	20
Three Important Words.....	20
The Content of the Apostolic Preaching of the Gospel in the Book of Acts .....	21
Peter's Sermon on Pentecost: Acts 2:14-36 .....	21
Peter's Sermon in Solomon's Porch (Acts 3:13-26 ) .....	22
Peter's Sermon to the Household of Cornelius: Acts 10:34-43 .....	24
Paul's Sermon in Pisidian Antioch: Acts 13:16-41 .....	25

Abbreviated Accounts .....	26
The Gospel in the New Testament.....	26
The Four Gospels.....	26
The Pauline Writings .....	28
General Epistles and the Apocalypse .....	29
The Saving Response to the Apostolic Preaching of the Gospel .....	29
The Gospels .....	30
The Book of Acts.....	31
Paul's Letters .....	32
The General Epistles.....	33
The Value of Ordinances .....	33
GOD'S PROMISE TO THE NATIONS .....	34
God's Promise to Abram's Family .....	34
Abram of Ur.....	34
A Chosen Nation.....	35
The Servant of Yahweh .....	35
The Rise of Judaism.....	35
The Kingdom of God is Preached .....	36
Jesus and the New Community of Faith.....	36
Jesus, the Servant of Yahweh .....	37
The Great Commission.....	38
Implications of the Great Commission .....	39
The Response of the Earliest Christians .....	39
The Meaning of "Apostle" in the NT .....	40
The Early Christians' Approach to Evangelism.....	41
The Question of Individual Responsibility.....	44
Grace and Perseverance .....	47
The Proof-texts of the Issue .....	48
Falling from Grace.....	48

Eternal Security .....	49
Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom .....	49
Divine Sovereignty .....	49
Human Freedom .....	50
Divine Sovereignty, Human Freedom and the Covenants of God.....	51
The Interplay of Grace and Faith in Salvation.....	55
Grace.....	56
Faith.....	57
Grace, Faith, and the New Covenant.....	58
A New Covenant is Promised.....	58
The New Covenant Is Established.....	59
Paul’s Analysis of the Covenants .....	59
The Unconditional Character of the New Covenant .....	60
The Unpardonable Sin .....	60
The Eternal Sin .....	61
Judas Iscariot .....	62
A Final Assessment.....	63
Turning Back .....	64
Psychological Assurance .....	64
The Promises of Security.....	65
The Warnings Against Defection .....	65
The Question in Christian History.....	66
Two Extremes.....	68
The Unity of the New Testament.....	69
The <i>Kerygma</i> (the proclamation).....	70
<i>Euangelion</i> (the good news) .....	70
<i>Logos</i> (the incarnate Word).....	71
<i>Skandalon</i> (the offense of the cross) .....	71
<i>Kyrios Christos</i> (Jesus as Lord and Messiah).....	72

<i>Soteria, Charis and Pistis</i> (salvation by grace through faith) .....	72
<i>Ethnoi</i> (God's promise to the nations).....	73
<i>Maranatha</i> (come, O Lord) .....	73
The <i>Ekklesia</i> (the congregation).....	73
<i>Mathetai</i> (the disciples of the Lord) .....	73
<i>Didache</i> (the teachings) .....	74
<i>Koinonia</i> (the sharing).....	75

## Jesus in the Gospels

Jesus Christ is the central figure of the Christian faith. This faith was developed from a sequence of historical events that occurred in Palestine in the years immediately prior to and including AD 30.<sup>1</sup> Many of the early Christians were people who had personally seen and heard Jesus (1 Co. 15:1-8). The knowledge of Jesus was kept alive by the oral tradition of the church, the preaching and teaching of the apostles and others who had known Jesus. But when these original eyewitnesses began to die, the need arose for a permanent record of the central Christian event, that is, the life and death of Jesus (Jn. 20:29). Furthermore, it was at least popularly assumed that the return of Christ would occur within a relatively short period of time (cf. Jn. 21:22-23). When this did not happen, there was the consequent question about a perceived delay in the *parousia* (= coming) of Jesus. Finally, there was the question of orthodoxy. Which stories about Jesus were authentic and trustworthy? Thus, many believers began to write accounts of Jesus' history (Lk. 1:1-2), and from the various accounts that were written, four portraits of Jesus became accepted as authoritative for the church. We know them as the four gospels:

MARK (written about AD 65, possibly in Rome)

MATTHEW (written about AD 85, possibly in Antioch)

LUKE (written about AD 85, location unknown)

JOHN (probably written in the 90's AD, possibly in Ephesus)

## The Writing of the Four Gospels

Even the casual reader is bound to notice that the four gospels are each distinct. Though one early attempt was made to merge the four into a single synthetic account,<sup>2</sup> it has been the practice of the church to keep them separate. Each gospel was composed by selecting narratives, parables, miracles and so forth from the traditions about Jesus, and we may assume that inasmuch as they were each written within and for specific communities, the selection of the material in each gospel reflects to some degree the situation of the church in which it was

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<sup>1</sup> There is scholarly debate, of course, as to when Jesus was actually crucified, but AD 30 remains the popular choice, cf. G. Ogg, "Chronology of the NT", *NBD* (1902), pp. 201-202.

<sup>2</sup> This harmony by Tatian in about 170 A.D. (the *Diatessaron*), though popular in some areas, did not win the final approval of the church. The story of Jesus has continued to come down to us in the original four gospels, cf. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, rev. ed. (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1963), p. 195f.



written.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the elements which were selected as the raw material with which to compose the gospels were chosen because they addressed a need in the community of faith. The selections were intentional, not haphazard. Each evangelist had at his disposal various resources, including the Old Testament in Hebrew and Greek, the oral traditions which had been preserved about Jesus, the written traditions which had already preceded him (cf. Lk. 1:1), and the eyewitness accounts of those who had personally witnessed events in the life of Jesus.

The four gospels form a unique genre of literature which is somewhat different than either a biography (at least in the modern sense), a diary, or the epic work about ancient heroes. Instead, a gospel is a literary form which seeks to answer a fundamental question, the question, “Who is Jesus?”

### **Gospel Emphases**

Each gospel portrait has a distinctive character, both in terms of structure and content.

#### *Gospel of Mark*

This is the gospel that gives to us the familiar title “gospel” (1:1).<sup>4</sup> Jesus is portrayed as an active Christ, and there is much less material about Jesus’ teaching than in the other gospels. The word *euthus* (= immediately) is a favorite of Mark’s, as though to emphasize that Jesus was not only busy but also in control (cf. 1:29-31)<sup>5</sup>. Mark devotes fully a third of his gospel to the passion of Jesus (Chapters 11-16). While he emphasizes Jesus as being fully human, he continually points beyond Jesus’ humanity to his divine sonship (1:1, 11, 24; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 12:7, 37; 13:32; 14:61-62; 15:39). A special feature of Mark’s Gospel is Jesus’ insistence that his messianic identity be kept secret until after the resurrection (1:25, 34, 44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26; 9:9).

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<sup>3</sup> As such, many scholars see three levels in the gospel narratives. The first level, the *sitz im leben Christi* (life situation of the historical Christ), describes what actually happened in the earthly period of Jesus’ ministry. The second level, the *sitz im leben kirche* (life situation of the church), can be inferred from the choice of stories and narratives which the evangelist selected. If for instance the evangelist selects many accounts of conflict between Jesus and the Jews, this may in turn suggest that there were later conflicts between the church and the synagogue, thus creating a need to hear anew the stories about Jesus conflicts. The third level, the *sitz im leben euangelium* (situation of the evangelist), reflects the editorial comments of the writer as he assesses and interprets the meaning of the stories about Jesus, cf. P. Ellis, *Matthew, His Mind and His Message* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1974), pp. 156-159.

<sup>4</sup> The term *euangelion* (= gospel, good news) was used in the Greco-Roman world for such things as the message from a runner that victory in battle had been won, that the emperor was having a birthday, and so forth, cf. R. Martin, *ISBE* (1982) 2.529.

<sup>5</sup> The extent to which Mark uses this word is especially evident in the opening passages (cf. 1:10, 18, 20, 21, 23, 29, 30, 31, 42, 43)

### *Gospel of Matthew*

It is generally conceded that Matthew was composed for a Christian Jewish community. The gospel does not explain Jewish customs and words as much as Mark. Also, Matthew consistently uses the phrase “kingdom of heaven” rather than “kingdom of God,” inasmuch as the term “kingdom of heaven” was a rabbinical expression familiar to the Jews.<sup>6</sup> Matthew paints his literary portrait of Jesus in five alternating patterns of narrative and discourse, each beginning with the phrase, “When Jesus had finished these sayings... (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). In keeping with his Jewish community, Matthew emphasizes that in Jesus the OT is fulfilled (1:22-23; 2:15, 17, 23; 3:3, 15; 4:14-16; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4-5; 26:56).<sup>7</sup> However, Matthew is careful to point out the universal implications of the gospel which extend beyond the Jewish Christian community. In his genealogy of Jesus, he lists four women who are gentiles (1:3, 5, 6). He describes eastern magi (2:1), a Roman soldier (8:5-13), and a Canaanite woman (15:22-28), all of whom came to faith in Jesus. Other references point toward this universalism as well (8:11-12; 12:18-21; 28:19).

### *Gospel of Luke*

Luke is unique in that it is the first volume of a two volume work (Lk. 1:1-4; Ac. 1:1). It is generally conceded that Luke was written to a Gentile community as reflected in the address to Theophilus (Gk. for “God-lover”). It is probable that Luke has a special desire for the church to be on good terms with the Roman Empire inasmuch as he describes the birth of Jesus in relation to Roman events (2:1-3; 3:1-2). Three times he notes that Pilate, the Roman procurator, found Jesus innocent (23:4, 13-16, 22). Luke contains a special geographical way of looking at the ministry of Jesus a progress from Galilee to Jerusalem. A whole section of the third gospel, sometimes called the “travel section”, stresses Jesus’ resolve to make it to Jerusalem (9:51-53, 57; 10:1, 38; 13:22, 31-32; 14:25; 17:11; 18:31, 35; 19:1, 28, 41). Just as Luke’s Gospel progresses from Galilee to Jerusalem, so his second work progresses from Jerusalem to Rome (Ac. 1:8; 28:16). Of some importance is the way in which Luke divides history into three great epochs:

- 1) from ancient Israel to John the Baptist (16:16a), and

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<sup>6</sup> The Jews avoided directly using the name of God out of reverence by substituting something with which God was associated, cf. O. Evans, *IDB* (1962) 3.18.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew’s use of the term *pleroo* (= fulfil, fill, make full, bring to completion) is much broader than merely prediction and verification. It can include that sense, of course (2:5-6; cf. Mic. 5:2), but it also includes the clarification of enigmatic OT passages (22:41-46; cf. Ps. 110:1), the exchange between the nation and its representative (2:15; cf. Ho. 11:1), and the recapitulation of OT events in a NT form (2:17-18; cf. Je. 31:15), cf. R. Longenecker, “‘Who is the Prophet Talking About,’ Some Reflections on the New Testament’s Use of the Old,” *Themelios* (Oct./Nov. 1987) 4-8.

- 2) the earthly ministry of Jesus (16:16b; Ac. 10:37-38), and
- 3) the ascension until the return of Christ (Ac. 1:1, 11).

Also of significance is a whole complex of words expressing the idea of amazement as if to force the reader to pose the question, “Who is Jesus?” (1:12, 21, 63, 65; 2:9, 18, 33, 47-48; 4:22, 32, 36; 5:9, 26; 7:16; 8:25, 35, 37, 56; 9:34, 43, 45; 11:14, 38, 20:26; 24:4, 12, 22,41)

### *Gospel of John*

The fourth gospel, composed by the “beloved disciple” and traditionally assumed to be the Apostle John (21:20-24), was expressly written to arouse or confirm faith in Jesus (20:30-31). It carefully structures the life of Jesus around seven great miracles:

2:11	Turning Water to Wine;
4:54	Healing the Nobleman ‘s Son;
5:8-9	Healing the Invalid at Bethesda;
6:14	Walking on the Water;
6:16-20	Feeding the 5,000;
9:13-16	Healing the Man Born Blind; and
11:43-47	Raising Lazarus

Associated with these seven miracles are seven great discourses

Chap.3	New Birth;
Chap.4	Water of Life;
Chap.5	Divine Son;
Chap.6	Bread of Life;
Chap.7	Holy Spirit;
Chap.8	Light of the World; and
Chapt.10	Good Shepherd.

Together, these miracles and discourses teach the meaning of Jesus’ person and work. The signs are not ends in themselves, but they are events which point beyond themselves to great truths about Jesus. The discourses and dialogues explain the deeper meaning of the signs. John also devotes a large portion of his gospel to a farewell discourse with the Twelve before his death (Chaps. 13-17). Because the two sections of the Fourth Gospel are so distinct, the first is sometimes

referred to as the Book of Signs (Chaps. 1-12) and the second as the Book of Glory (Chaps. 13-21).

Characteristic of John's Gospel are the strong antitheses between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, life and death, love and hatred, and the world and the community of faith. It is John's Gospel that describes Jesus' ministry as being somewhat over three years in length (he mentions three passovers, 2:13; 6:4; 12:1). The Fourth Gospel presents a strong christology that Jesus was divine, and this is especially evident in the prologue where Jesus is described as the incarnate Logos (1:1-18).

### **Gospel Relationships<sup>8</sup>**

The observant reader will notice that Matthew, Mark and Luke (called the synoptic gospels) are very similar in structure, chronology and content. John, on the other hand, is quite dissimilar on the same counts. Whereas all the gospels contain such narratives as the baptism of Jesus, the feeding of the 5,000, the use of titles for Jesus like Son of God, Christ, Son of Man, and the stories of the passion and the empty tomb, each gospel also carries some stories that are not found elsewhere, they each are found in a unique literary style, each bear some differences in chronology, and so forth. The synoptic gospels are so similar that in a number of places they are virtually identical. On the other hand, there are places where Matthew and Luke agree but Mark has nothing. Scholars have worked hard to account for this synoptic phenomena. They have discovered, for instance, that of the 661 verses in Mark, Matthew reproduces some 600 of them and Luke some 300. Furthermore, Matthew and Luke never agree in diverging from Mark's wording.

These facts have given rise to several theories of literary dependency, such as:

- ♦ There may be a common source available to all
- ♦ One might have been written first while the other two copied from it
- ♦ Each was originally quite different, but later editors partially harmonized them
- ♦ All three were written by authors who collaborated
- ♦ Divine inspiration accounts for the common ground between them

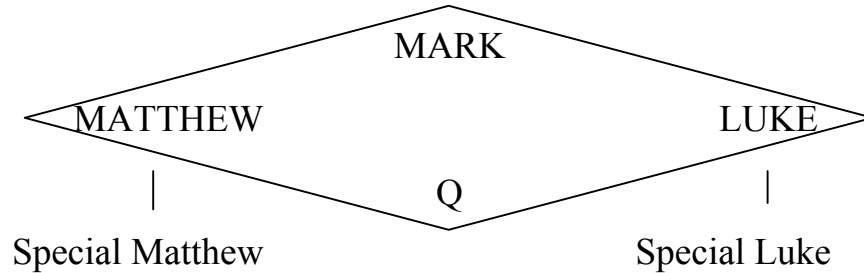
The most commonly accepted theory, but by no means the only one, is that Mark is the first gospel to be written and that both Matthew and Luke used Mark

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<sup>8</sup> For an extensive summary of the synoptic problem, see: R. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1971), pp. 69-79.

as the basic structure for writing their own gospels. Related to this theory is the hypothesis of “Q” (“Q” stands for the German *queue* -source). The Q hypothesis is the attempt to explain the common material between Matthew and Luke which is not in Mark. It suggests that there was another early source, either oral or written, primarily made up of sayings of Jesus.

Altogether, these suggestions have produced what is known as the four source theory.



### **The Basic Chronology of the Life of Jesus**

Due to the differences between the gospels in terms of content, thematic arrangement and, in some cases, simple lack of information, it is not possible to produce a perfect chronology of the life of Jesus in which all the various elements are placed with certainty. However, enough information is given to provide a skeletal structure of his life, and this is as follows:

1. Birth and Infancy Narratives
2. Ministry of John the Baptist
3. Baptism of Jesus
4. Early Judean Ministry
5. Great Galilean Ministry
6. Crisis in the Galilean Ministry
7. Journey to Jerusalem
8. Passion of Jesus
  - a. The Triumphant Entry
  - b. The Days of Controversy
  - c. Jesus' Final Meal with the Twelve
  - d. His Prayer in Gethsemane

- e. The Arrest
- f. The Jewish Hearing
- g. The Roman Trial
- h. The Crucifixion
- i. The Resurrection

## **The Life and Ministry of Jesus**

One of the most succinct descriptions of Jesus of Nazareth is given in a sermon by Simon Peter (Ac. 10:36-43). It may be noted that he gave equal emphasis to the *life* of Jesus and to the *death* of Jesus. This same two-fold emphasis is to be found in the four gospels.

### **The Words of Jesus**

Scholars make the helpful distinction between the “voice” of Jesus (*ipsissima vox*) and the actual “words” of Jesus (*ipsissima verba*). In the first place, Jesus almost certainly spoke Aramaic as his native tongue, and in a few places the gospels directly quote him as such (of. Mk. 5:41; 7:34; 14:36; 15:34). He says things like *talitha koum* (= little girl, get up), *ephphatha* (= be unbarred), *abba* (= papa), *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani* (= my God, my God, why have you forsaken me). However, the vast bulk of the gospels are in Greek, and this would have necessitated a translation of Jesus’ words. Furthermore, in many places where the gospels parallel each other, they do not reproduce the words of Jesus as verbatim equivalents (compare, for instance, Mt. 12:25-30//Mk. 3:23-27//Mk. 11:17-23). This should not alarm us, for if God allowed the gospel to come to us in this fashion, we can be sure that he considers it sufficient. At the same time, we should not approach the gospels as though they were a modern tape recording. For the most part, they give to us the *voice* of Jesus if not always the verbatim *words* of Jesus in Aramaic. Jesus words are first put into Greek by the gospel writers, and then they are translated into English for us by modern scholars.

### **The Teachings of Jesus**

A large portion of the gospels are taken up with the teachings of Jesus. He was regarded by many as a rabbi (= teacher), and yet unlike the ordinary scribes and teachers, he claimed authority both in and beyond the Hebrew Bible (cf. Mt. 7:28-29; 5:17-20, 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43).

### *Blocks of Teaching*

Much of Jesus' teaching is blocked by the gospel writers into sections with a common theme. Some of the most recognizable of these sections are:

- ♦ Sermon on the Mount//Sermon on the Plain (Mt. 5-7; Lk. 6:17-49)
- ♦ Parables of the Kingdom (Mt. 13; Mk. 4:1-34; Lk. 8:4-18)
- ♦ Missionary Instructions to the Disciples (Mt. 10:5-42; Lk. 10:1-16)
- ♦ Discourse on the Mount of Olives (Mt. 24-25; Mk. 13; Lk. 21)
- ♦ Eucharistic Words of Jesus (Mt. 26:20-30; Mk. 14:17-26; Lk. 22:14-37; cf. I Co. 11:23-26).

The Fourth Gospel has large sections of teaching not found elsewhere, such as, the sermon on the bread from heaven, the teaching on the Good Shepherd, the sermon on the Light of the World, the teaching on the new birth and the private teachings to the 12 on the night of Jesus' betrayal.

### *Circumstances of Teaching*

Jesus was very adaptable. He taught both in public (Mt. 21:23) and in private homes (Lk. 10:38-39), in the synagogues (Mt. 4:23), in the streets (Lk. 9:57-62) and in the country (Mk. 6:32-34).

### *Rhetorical Methods*

Jesus' teachings are rich in rhetorical devices. He employed such methods as point and counter-point (Mt. 22:41-46), Socratic questioning (Mt. 16:13-16), *reductio ad absurdum* (reducing an opponent's argument to its absurd consequences, Mt. 12:25-28), *a fortiori* (if *that* is true, how much more is *this* true, Mt. 6:25-30), repetition (Mt. 5:3-11), illustration (Door, Vine, Shepherd), exaggeration (Mk. 10:25; Mt. 5:29-30; 7:3), humor (Mk. 4:21; 7:14-19), poetry (Mk. 4:30; Mt. 20:16; 7:6),<sup>9</sup> exegesis (the interpretation of Scripture, Mt. 22:29-32) and parables (Mk. 4:33-34).

### *Literary Forms in the Gospels*

The stories about Jesus in the gospels are of different types. There are pronouncement stories (stories which end with a maxim, cf. Mk. 2:15-17), miracle

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<sup>9</sup> There is considerable rhythm in the sayings of Jesus which can only be discussed in the original languages. However, it may be pointed out that there are two-beat, three-beat, and four-beat rhythms, not to mention alliteration, assonance and paronomasia, cf. J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribners, 1971), pp. 20-29.

stories (where the emphasis is on what Jesus did, cf. Mk. 1:29-31), stories pointing to the true identity of Jesus (Cf. Lu. 2:41-52) as well as groups of other various sayings of Jesus.

### *Teaching Themes*

It would be too great a task to attempt a list of all the themes of Jesus' teaching here, but the following are two of the major ones:

*Who God Is:* Jesus consistently described God as the Creator (Mk. 13:19), the Father of his people (Mt. 6), and the Father of his Son, Jesus himself (Jn. 8:12-30, 54-58; 20:17).

*The Kingdom of God:* The phrase "kingdom of God" (or "kingdom of heaven") is the phrase Jesus used to describe the rule of God which had broken into human history in the person of Jesus himself (Lk. 11:17-22; 17:20-21). However, the kingdom of God which had broken into the world in a hidden and partial way (Mt. 13:31-33; Mk. 4:26-29) would ultimately triumph over the whole world (Lk. 11:2; Jn. 18:33-37; Mt. 25:31-46). In this sense, the kingdom of God is future (Mt. 7:21-23; 8:11). Thus, the kingdom of God has already been inaugurated in the world through the first coming of Jesus Christ, but it shall not reach its full consummation until Christ returns at the end of the age.

### **The Acts of Jesus**

The impact of Jesus' teaching was reinforced by his actions.

### *Miracles*

The exorcisms and healings which Jesus performed were signs pointing beyond themselves toward Jesus' true identity (Mk. 3:23-30; Jn. 2:11; 4:54; 6:14; 11:47-48; 20:29-31). Essentially, there are two kinds of miracles which Jesus did, healing/exorcism miracles and nature miracles.

### *Practices*

Jesus practiced certain habits which served as patterns of behavior for his followers. Noteworthy among these are prayer (Mk. 1:35; 6:46; Lk. 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28; 22:31-32, 41) and fellowship meals (Mk. 2:15-19; Lk. 15:1-2; Mt. 11:18-19; Jn. 2:1-3; Lk. 22:7-23; 24:30, 41-43; Jn. 21:12-13). In fact, the most common depiction of ultimate salvation is the picture of table fellowship with Jesus and his people in the age to come (Mk. 14:25; Lk. 22:29-30; Mt. 8:11-12;



22:1-14; 25:1-12; Lk. 14:16-24).

## **The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus**

Equally important to the life of Jesus was the death and resurrection of Jesus. In fact, it is the resurrection of Jesus that makes the Christian faith distinctive and serves as Christianity's central historical and theological event. In its briefest and earliest form, the essence of the gospel consists of the fact that Christ died for our sins, he was buried, and he arose from the dead (1 Co. 15:1-4). The four gospels give an extraordinary amount of space to this climactic event and those events surrounding it which seem to have occurred within the space of about a week (Mk. 11-16; Mt. 21-28; Lk. 19-24; Jn. 12-21).

### **Jesus' Self-Understanding of His Passion**

The gospels consistently present Jesus' final trip to Jerusalem as the product of self-determination and full cognizance of the consequences (Mk. 8:31-33; 10:45; Mt. 12:40; 16:21-24; Lk. 9:51; 13:31-33; 18:31-34; Jn. 3:14-15; 6:53-57; 10:11, 15, 17-18).

### **The Catalyst That Provoked Jesus' Death**

The synoptic gospels present the triumphant entry and the cleansing of the temple as the spark which ignited the hatred of the Jews. During the triumphant entry, at which time Jesus was heralded as messiah (Mk. 11:8-10), the Jewish leaders were roused to indignation (Mt. 21:15-17; Lk. 19:39-40). The next day, when Jesus drove out those who sold temple sacrifices and exchanged money, they plotted to apprehend and kill him (Mk. 11:18; Lk. 19:45-48). The Fourth Gospel adds another reason for which the Jews desired to have Jesus silenced. The resurrection of Lazarus caused such a wave of popularity that the Jewish leaders feared a reprisal from the Romans on the grounds of insurrection (11:45-53).

### **The Days of Opposition**

Jesus' final days in Jerusalem were surrounded by tension and controversy. Matthew's Gospel gives the fullest account with descriptions of challenges by the chief priests and elders (21:23f.), the Pharisees (22:15f.), the Sadducees (22:23f.), and a counter challenge by Jesus himself (22:41f.). This was followed by a blistering denunciation of the Jewish religious leaders (Mt. 23).

For their part, the Jewish leaders continued in their pursuit of finding a way to silence Jesus without attracting public attention (Mk. 14:1-2; Mt. 26:3-5). When one of the 12 disciples offered to sell out his master for a small sum, they were

delighted and quickly arranged to accommodate him (Mk. 14:10-11; Mt. 26:14-16; Lk. 22:1-6).

### **The Last Supper**

There is some question about the date of the last Passover meal which Jesus shared with his disciples. John's account makes it seem a day earlier than the synoptic accounts, though this may only reflect a difference of calendars between the Pharisees and the Sadducees.<sup>10</sup>

At the Passover, Jesus instituted a memorial ritual which is practiced throughout Christianity, a ritual that recalls the death of Jesus and reenacts his final supper with the Twelve. He divided bread and wine among his followers, instructing them that it represented his broken body and shed blood, and he encouraged them to celebrate his death by this ritual until the consummation of the kingdom of God (1 Co. 11:23-26; Mk. 14:22-25; Mt. 26:26-29; Lk. 22:14-20).

Though the Fourth Gospel does not record the eucharistic words of Jesus, it does provide a singular account of Jesus washing the disciples feet (13:1-17).

### **The Arrest in Gethsemane**

At night, Jesus habitually stayed out of Jerusalem due to the antagonism of the Jewish leaders (Mk. 11:11; Mt. 21:17; Lk. 21:37). On the night of his betrayal, after the disciples had sung the final Passover hymn, they went to Gethsemane (the oil press) on the Mt. of Olives to pray. Between the upper room of the last supper and Gethsemane, John's Gospel places a lengthy farewell discourse which Jesus gave to the Twelve in anticipation of his coming death (Jn. 13-17). While in Gethsemane, Jesus prayed the famous "not my will, but thine" prayer of commitment. Here he was betrayed and arrested (Mk. 14:32-52; Jn. 18:1-14)

### **The Hearing and Trial**

It was necessary for the Jewish leaders to consolidate their grounds for executing Jesus. They were forbidden by Roman law to perform an execution themselves, so it was necessary that they have a solid case before approaching the Roman procurator (Jn. 18:31). Thus, they led Jesus through a lengthy hearing before Annas, Caiaphas and the Jewish ruling council (Mk. 14:43-65; Mt. 26:57-68; 27:1; Jn. 18:12-14, 19-24). The primary grounds for calling for an execution at this stage was religious, that is, blasphemy against God.

When the Jews approached Pilate, the Roman administrator over Jerusalem,

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<sup>10</sup> R. Martin, "Lord's Supper, The," *NBD* (1982), pp. 707-709.

they shifted their charge to insurrection (Mk. 15:1-2; Lk. 23:1-2). Though Pilate doggedly sought to set Jesus free, the Jewish leaders would not be thwarted (Lk. 23:4-5). When an effort to pass the problem to Herod, Tetrarch of Galilee, did not succeed (Lk. 23:6-12), Pilate again sought Jesus' release, but to no avail (Mk. 15:1-15; Lk. 23:13-25).

### **The Crucifixion**

Crucifixion, a form of capital punishment used by the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, and later the Romans, was the method of execution used for slaves, provincials and the lowest type of criminals. It was preceded by a severe beating and a processional in which the victim was forced to bear the cross-beam of his death instrument to the site of the execution. Stripped naked, the condemned man was tied or nailed to the cross-beam and hoisted onto the upright post so that his feet, which were then also tied or nailed, were sufficiently clear of the ground. To aid in supporting the weight of the body, a small peg projected from the upright post so as to fit beneath the victim's pelvis. Death was a combination of starvation, exhaustion, thirst, and especially asphyxiation.<sup>11</sup>

All of the gospels describe in vivid detail the brutal death which Jesus died, though none of them reproduces the entire body of data alone (Mk. 15:21-47; Mt. 27:32-61; Lk. 23:26-54; Jn. 19:17-42). By drawing from all four of the evangelists' accounts, one can collect the famous seven sayings of Jesus from the cross, each of which contains great theological significance for Christians:

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Lk. 23:34)

“Dear woman, here is your son.” (And to the Beloved Disciple) “Here is your mother.” (Jn. 19:26-27)

“I am thirsty.” (Jn. 19:28)

“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Lk. 23:43)

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk. 15:34; Mt. 27:46)

“It is finished.” (Jn. 19:30)

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” (Lk. 23:46)

### **The Resurrection**

The reality of the resurrection rests upon two kinds of evidence: 1) the empty tomb and 2) the appearances of the risen Lord. That the tomb was empty, in spite

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<sup>11</sup> Hans-Ruedi Weber, *The Cross: Tradition and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

of a heavy stone and an armed guard (Mk. 15:46; Mt. 27:60, 62-66), is stated by all the witnesses (Mk. 16:1-8; Mt. 28:1-7; Lk. 24:1-12; Jn. 20:1-13).

Appearances of the risen Christ, first mentioned by Paul in his first Corinthian letter (15:4-8), became the decisive factor for the Easter faith. He appeared to Mary of Magdala (Jn. 20:11-18), to the other women (Mt. 28:9-10), to Peter (Lk. 24:33-35), to Cleopas and his friend (Lk. 24:13-35), and to ten apostles (Lk. 24:36-43; Jn. 20:19-25), all on Easter Sunday. Later he appeared to eleven apostles (Jn. 20:26-29), to seven disciples in Galilee (Jn. 21:1-24), to all the apostles in Galilee and over 500 others (Mt. 28:16-20; 1 Co. 15:6). He also appeared to James (1 Co. 15:7) and to all the apostles just before the ascension into heaven (Lk. 24:44-52; Ac. 1:1-11). Luke could write that Jesus “showed himself and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive.” He appeared to his followers “over a period of forty days” (Ac. 1:3). All these appearances are the sure and sufficient evidences for the Christian faith.

## The Apostolic Preaching of the Gospel

*....God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.*

1 Corinthians 1:21b

There is no minimizing the cruciality of the apostolic preaching of the gospel. If people are saved by faith, and they are, it is equally true that they attain faith through the preaching of Christ (Ro. 10:17). The preaching of the gospel saves men and women when they receive it, stand on it and hold steadfastly to it (1 Co. 15:1, 2). The appeal that God makes to the unbeliever does not come as a mysterious, private force, but rather, it comes through the message of the gospel (Lk. 10:16; 2 Co. 5:20; 1 Th. 2:13). The new birth is an inward work of God that occurs through the good news as it is proclaimed (1 Fe. 1:23, 25). If this is so, then a clear understanding of the apostolic preaching of the gospel is in order. If one fails to match this pattern of NT emphasis, he/she has turned to another gospel, which is really no gospel at all, and will stand condemned (Ga. 1:6-9).

### Three Important Words

In any study of the apostolic preaching of the gospel, it is important to understand and to differentiate between the following three word groups:

*Kerysso, Kerygma* (= preaching): The words for preaching in the NT carry the idea of proclamation or announcement. They are derived from the word *kerux* (= herald), that is, “the man who was commissioned by his ruler or the state to call out with a clear voice some item of news and so to make it known.”<sup>12</sup>

*Didasko, Didache* (= teaching): The words for teaching in the NT carry the idea of giving instruction, usually ethical and practical.

*Euangelion* (= gospel): The word gospel simply means good news. In secular thought it referred to the message of a herald. In 9 B.C., for instance, the proclamation of Caesar Augustus’ birthday as the beginning of the civil year was called “good news” or “gospel.” In the NT the word gospel comes to mean the good news about Jesus Christ.

It is worth noting that there is a clear distinction in the NT between preaching and teaching. To announce the good news (preaching) was by no means the same thing as giving moral instruction or exhortation (teaching)<sup>13</sup>. Regrettably, the distinction between preaching and teaching in some churches has often been reduced to a matter of style. For many people, preaching is something that is psychological, invitational, experiential, emotional, inspirational or impressionistic. Teaching, on the other hand, is too often seen as a dry exposition of Scripture.

## **The Content of the Apostolic Preaching of the Gospel in the Book of Acts**

There are four times in the Book of Acts that Luke records extended accounts of the preaching of the gospel. As these accounts are studied and compared, a basic underlying structure may be seen that is common to each.

### **Peter’s Sermon on Pentecost: Acts 2:14-36**

There are at least four elements in this first proclamation of the gospel.

#### *The Prophecies Are Fulfilled (2:16-21)*

The final days of salvation-history, as predicted by Joel (2:28-32), have arrived. God is even now pouring out his Spirit upon all people! The Holy Spirit is not just for the privileged few, but for all men, women and slaves. Everyone who will invoke the Lord’s name will be saved.

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<sup>12</sup> L Coenen, “Proclamation”, *NIDNTT* (1978), p. 48ff.

<sup>13</sup> Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), pp. 7, 8.

*God Has Acted Decisively in the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (2:22-24)*

Jesus was not just a self-acclaimed prophet but was accredited by divine miracles, signs and wonders. His death was not accidental but was crucial to God's plan. The resurrection was his triumph over death.

*The Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus are Attested by the Scriptures and by Eyewitnesses (2:25-32)*

David prophesied of the resurrection of Christ (Ps. 16:8-11), and his prophetic exclamation is spoken as though it came from messiah's own lips. David's words were not about himself, obviously, for David surely died and decayed. Rather, his words were about Christ and were uttered on the basis of God's promise that a descendant would ultimately ascend to the throne forever (2 Sa. 7:12-13). Thus, God raised Jesus to life, just as David predicted, and the apostles were special eyewitnesses of this event.

*Jesus Has Been Exalted as the Lord Over All (2:33- 36)*

The resurrection and ascension of Jesus to God's right hand has established Jesus as the Lord over all. Of this event David also prophesied (Ps. 110:1). Jesus received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and poured it forth.

**Peter's Sermon in Solomon's Porch (Acts 3:13-26)**

Essentially the same elements are also present in this second recorded sermon by Peter.

*The Prophecies Are Fulfilled (3:13a)*

In addressing the crowd who had gathered after the healing of the crippled beggar, Peter began with a direct reference to Is. 52:13. What Isaiah had predicted concerning the Servant of Yahweh, God had brought to pass in Jesus. The time of fulfillment had arrived! The idea of glorification refers to the death and resurrection of Jesus, as Peter explains in the succeeding verses (cf. Jn. 7:39; 12:16, 23; 13:31, 32; 17:1, 5).

*Eyewitnesses Attest that God Has Acted Decisively in the Death and Resurrection of Jesus (3:13b-16)*

Although Jesus was rejected, tried and executed, God's purpose was not thwarted, for he raised Jesus from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is not a theory; it is verified by special eyewitnesses who saw him after his resurrection. Furthermore, it is because Jesus is alive that the notable miracle of healing occurred.

*The Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus are Attested by Scripture as well (3:17, 18, 22-26)*

In explaining the fulfillment of prophecy, Peter includes three ideas:

- ♦ 3:17, 18: What happened in the death of Jesus was not incidental; rather, it was the decisive action of God in fulfilling the predictions by the prophets that the Christ would suffer (see especially the entire section of Is. 42:14--53:12)
- ♦ 3:22, 23: The coming of Jesus was a direct fulfillment of Moses' prophecy (Dt. 18:15, 18, 19). The Jews had asked the Baptist if he were the fulfillment of Moses' prediction, but John denied it (Jn. 1:21, 24, 25). Jesus, however, was just such a fulfillment! He was "the Prophet."
- ♦ 3:24-26: The entire company of the prophets had looked to the days of eschatological fulfillment, and now they had arrived. "Those days" had now become "these days." The promise God made to Abraham and his descendants concerning the blessing of all nations has come to pass in Jesus (Ge. 12:2-3). This blessing that God promised to Abraham as well as the ministry of Isaiah's Servant of Yahweh are both fulfilled in Jesus who came to turn people from their wickedness.

*Jesus is the Exalted Messiah (3:19-21)*

Repentance was the necessary response if these Jews were to enjoy the "times of refreshing." The phrase "times of refreshing" is unique and probably refers to the blessings to come at the end of the ages. It is idiomatic for the messianic age. Such blessings will be available at the glorious return of Christ, who has been appointed as God's messiah for Israel. From the time of his resurrection and ascension until his return, Jesus will remain in the heavens as the exalted Lord and Christ.

### **Peter's Sermon to the Household of Cornelius: Acts 10:34-43<sup>14</sup>**

It might be supposed that when the gospel was preached to Gentiles it would differ from the gospel as preached to the Jews. This, however, is not the case. The order of presentation may have differed somewhat, but the essential content of the gospel remained constant.

#### *Introduction (10:34, 35)*

In preaching to the Gentiles, Peter introduced his sermon by declaring the universality of the good news. If God does not show favoritism but accepts all men and women regardless of nationality, then the good news about Jesus is for everyone!

#### *God Has Acted Decisively in the Life of Jesus (10:36-38)*

God's good news was that men and women can have peace with him through Jesus Christ. This good news is the story of Jesus who began his ministry in Galilee under the anointing of God.

#### *The Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus is Attested by Eyewitnesses (10:39-41)*

It becomes increasingly clear why membership among the twelve apostles was reserved for those who had personally been with Jesus (Ac. 1:21-22). They were God's chosen witnesses to declare and to testify to the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

#### *Jesus Has Been Exalted as the Judge of the Living and the Dead (10:42)*

Earlier, Peter had declared Jesus to be Lord (2:36). Now he emphasizes that Jesus is the one with whom all persons must reckon at the end of the ages. He is the heavenly Son of Man who shall judge the nations (cf. Da. 7:13; Jn. 5:27)

#### *The Good News About Jesus was Predicted by the Old Testament Prophets (10:43)*

There is a continuity between the Old Testament and the message about Jesus.

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<sup>14</sup> The *oikonomia* (= household) was an important social structure in the Greco-Roman world. It was a large inclusive socially cohesive unit composed of a number of families. There was no limit to size providing the master was capable of supporting its members. These included relatives, friends, clients and slaves who made up the community. The solidarity of the household was expressed in the adoption of a common religion, chosen by the head of the household, and thus it is easy to understand why Cornelius' response to Peter included the baptism of the entire community, cf. D. Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament: A Sociological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1984), pp. 79-86.



The good news about Jesus was not the beginning of a new religion, but it was the consummation of a chain of divine revelations in word and deed which began in the Old Testament. Everyone who would believe in Jesus would receive forgiveness of sins.

### **Paul's Sermon in Pisidian Antioch: Acts 13:16-41**

While the figure of Peter dominates the first half of the Book of Acts, the figure of Paul dominates the latter half. Still, the basic content of the gospel does not change.

#### *The Promises Have Been Fulfilled (13:16-25)*

In addressing the mixed assembly of Jews and Gentile God-fearers, Paul briefly recounted the mighty acts of God in the Old Testament. He climaxed this history by announcing that just as he had promised, God had brought a Savior, Jesus, from David's line. This event was not only predicted by the prophets, but Jesus was the one announced by John the Baptist, the desert preacher whom most Jews regarded as a true prophet.

#### *The Message of Salvation is the Death, Burial and Resurrection of Jesus (13:26-30)*

The message of salvation is sent to Jew and Gentile alike, and the heart of that message is that Jesus was rejected by his own people, condemned and executed. He was buried, but God raised him from the dead!

#### *The Resurrection is Attested by Eyewitnesses and the Old Testament Prophets (10:31-37)*

There are special eyewitnesses who can verify that Jesus was dead but is now alive. Furthermore, the Old Testament prophets foresaw the resurrection (Ps. 2:7; Is. 55:3; Ps. 16:10). It is instructive to note that Paul treats Ps. 16:10 in precisely the same fashion as did Peter in Acts 2:25-31.

#### *Justification is by Faith in the Appropriate Response to the Good News About Jesus (13:38-41)*

The one who seeks to be justified by strict adherence to Moses' law will be disappointed. Rather, salvation is the result of believing the message about Jesus. Paul's allusion to Hab. 1:5 is a stern warning. Just as those who scorned God's message about the rise of the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar met with disaster, so also would those who scorn the message of salvation through Jesus!

## Abbreviated Accounts

Besides the four foregoing sermons, there is abundant evidence in the Acts that the preaching of the gospel followed an unvarying pattern, even in the accounts that are only partial. This preaching included the eyewitness accounts of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus (Ac. 4:1, 10-12, 20, 33; 5:29; 17:2, 3, 18, 30-32; 26:22, 23), the attestation of the message of Jesus by the prophets (Ac. 8:30-35), and the announcement that Jesus was the Christ and the Judge of all humans (Ac. 5:42; 9:22; 17:3, 31; 18:5, 19).

## The Gospel in the New Testament

Having observed the content of the gospel preaching in the narratives of Luke's selected history of the post-Easter community, it is in order to inspect the other New Testament documents so as to see how they correlate.

## The Four Gospels

It will become immediately apparent that the four gospels, while to some degree biographical in nature, essentially describe for us the same structure of good news as one finds in the preaching of Acts.

### *The Fulfillment of Prophecy*

Even in a casual reading of the four gospels, one cannot help but be impressed by the frequent allusions and quotations of the OT. This is to be seen most prominently in Matthew, but it is very much evident in the other three as well. There are two specific areas to be noted in this regard:

Fulfillment Statements: All four gospels appeal to Jesus as the fulfillment of the OT promises by using the phrase, "...that it might be fulfilled...." Mark introduces his gospel with a summary statement that the life of Jesus specifically was the time of fulfillment (1:15). Luke closes his gospel with the same concept (24:44).

Christological Titles/Names: The various names and titles by which Jesus is known inherently carry within them the concept of fulfillment:

- ♦ *Jesus* (= Yahweh is Salvation) - The time of God's intervention to save his people, as predicted by the prophets, has arrived (Lk. 1:54, 55; 2:67-75; Mt. 1:21).
- ♦ *Christ* (Messiah)
- ♦ *Lord* (the name for Yahweh in the Greek translation of the OT)
- ♦ *Savior* (deliverer)

- ♦ *Son of Man* (the heavenly figure who would come to rule over the nations, cf. Da. 7:13)
- ♦ *Son of God* (from Ps. 2:7)
- ♦ *Servant* (from Is. 42-53)
- ♦ *Prophet* (from Dt. 18:15, 18-19)
- ♦ *Son of David* (see especially Ps. 89)
- ♦ “*I Ams*” of the Fourth Gospel (see especially Ex. 3:14)

### *The Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus*

A great deal of discussion has occurred over just how to classify the four gospels as literature. Though they are by nature historical and biographical, they are not properly biographies *per se* nor epics nor memoirs. They are a unique genre that has no exact counterpart in either ancient or modern times.

In the four gospels there are three focal points which occupy the center stage. They are:

1. The Mighty Acts of Jesus: Jesus’ miracles were a form of self-authentication indicating that he was from God (cf. Jn. 5:19; 9:30-33; 10:37, 38; 20:30, 31).
2. The Sayings of Jesus: Jesus’ teachings are the pattern for understanding and living the Christian life.
3. The Passion: The death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus at God’s right hand is the crowning matrix of events in all four gospels as can be seen from the amount of space given to it.

	<i>Public Ministry</i>		<i>Passion</i>	
Matthew	1-25	Roughly	26-28	A
Mark	1-13	3 ½	14-16	Few
Luke	1-21	Years	22-24	Days
John	1-12		13-21	

In each case, the four evangelists produced a testimony of witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

### *The Twelve Apostles' Understanding of the Gospel*

The question may well be asked, “How did the apostles know the difference between central and peripheral issues in the story of Jesus, and furthermore, how did they come to interpret the death of Jesus as they did?” The answer to this question lies in that they received their understanding from Jesus himself, either explicitly and in person (Mk. 9:31-33; 10:32-34; Lk. 24:25-27, 32, 44-48; Ac. 1:1-3) or indirectly through the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:25, 26; 15:26, 27; 16:12-15; 17:26). John 14-17 is a crucial area of transition. In it Jesus addresses the Twelve Apostles and prepares them for their role as the primary witnesses of the gospel after his resurrection and ascension.

### **The Pauline Writings**

The letters of Paul are only surpassed in length by the writings of Luke. Paul, more than any other NT author, has shaped our understanding of the person and work of Jesus.

#### *Revelation and Tradition<sup>15</sup>*

Paul uses the word *paralambano* when he speaks of the gospel he “received.” Ordinarily, this word in the language of the first century implied receiving something by tradition as in receiving a body of truth passed on by others (1 Co. 11:23; 15:3). At the same time, Paul maintained that his understanding of the gospel was not received from men (Ga. 1:12) but came by revelation. These two statements need not be taken as contradictory but as both being true in Paul’s understanding of the gospel.

- ♦ By Revelation: Paul was not convinced by a preached sermon that Jesus was alive. He was convinced by the risen Lord Jesus himself on the Damascus road.
- ♦ By Tradition: Still, he received many details of the life and death of Jesus in his contact with the apostles in Jerusalem (Ga. 1:18; 2:1,

#### *The Gospel Core*

In all Paul’s writings, the core of the gospel centers upon the death of Jesus so much so that to Paul the “gospel” and the “message of the cross” were synonyms (1 Co. 1:17, 18; cf. 1 Co. 1:22-24; 2:1, 2; Ga. 3:1). The most extensive description of the gospel according to Paul is in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8.

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<sup>15</sup> F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 86-94.

*That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.* This statement embraces both the saving action of God in Christ and the fulfillment of prophecy.

*That he was buried*

*That he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures*

*That he was seen by many witnesses, including Paul himself*

### *The Interpretation of the Gospel*

Paul's unique contribution to the preaching of the gospel lies in his interpretation of the death of Jesus in special word pictures. Prominent among them are his descriptions of Christ's saving work in terms of:

*Reconciliation* (the picture of social alienation and estrangement)

*Redemption* (the picture of a slave sold in the market)

*Justification* (the picture of a criminal condemned in a court of law)

*Substitution* (the picture of criminal punishment in which the retribution due to the guilty is willingly accepted by another)

*Adoption* (the picture of receiving the rights of sonship either by coming of age or by transfer of guardianship)

### **General Epistles and the Apocalypse**

What can be seen in the Acts, the Gospels and the Pauline letters can also be seen in the remainder of the NT documents. Hebrews emphasizes the "once for all" sacrifice of Christ (He. 9:26-28), his exaltation (He. 1:3) and the fulfillment of prophecy (He. 10:15-18). Peter does the same (1 Pe. 1:3, 10-12), and he also confirms that he was an eyewitness of Christ's glory (2 Pe. 1:16-18). John follows in the same way (1 Jn. 1:1, 7; 2:2). The final document, the Apocalypse of John, is no exception (Re. 1:5, 18; 2:8; 5:9).

### **The Saving Response to the Apostolic Preaching of the Gospel**

If the gospel is the good news that the time of fulfillment has arrived in the person and work of Jesus, if salvation has been effected in the death and resurrection of Jesus, if this good news is attested by eyewitnesses and by the OT Scriptures, and if Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of the Father as Savior, Lord, Messiah and Judge, then it remains to look at the saving response to the gospel.

## The Gospels

The gospels set the pattern for understanding how women and men should respond to the “good news,” for Jesus called upon people to respond even while he was in the process of doing his saving work.

### *The Synoptics*

The key words in Matthew, Mark and Luke which describe the proper response to the gospel are “repent” and “believe” (Mt. 3:2, 8; 4:17; 11:20; 21:32; Mk. 1:15; 6:12; Lk. 3:8; 5:32; 8:12; 13:3, 5; 15:7, 10). The word “repent” signifies a change of mind with respect toward Jesus Christ. It indicates “a radical transformation of thought, attitude, outlook and direction.”<sup>16</sup> The word “believe” means “to be persuaded of,” or “to place confidence in” or “to trust.”<sup>17</sup> It is much closer to our English concept of commitment than to just intellectual assent. As such, repentance and faith are inseparable. To truly repent is to believe and to truly believe is to repent. In the sense of the Bible, it would be impossible to do the one without the other.

#### 1. The Relation of Repentance and Faith to Baptism

In the synoptics there is a close connection between repentance/faith and baptism. Baptism is seen to be an outward ceremony that is symbolic of repentance and faith (Mt. 3:5, 6, 11; Mk. 1:4, 5; Lk. 3:3; 7:29, 30). Baptism is not a magic act that saves people. Rather, it is an outward act that expresses an inward reality--an inward reality of repentance and faith. In his early ministry, Jesus’ disciples baptized many people as did the disciples of John the Baptist (Jn. 3:25, 26; 4:1, 2).

#### 2. The Great Commission

Water baptism as an expression of faith and repentance was ordained by Christ just before his ascension (Mt. 28:19; Mk. 16:15, 16; Lk. 24:46, 47).

### *The Fourth Gospel*

John’s gospel does not contain the word “repent.” However, the word “believe” is used copiously of which the following is a sampling (1:7, 12; 3:14-18, 36; 4:39, 53; 5:24; 6:29, 40, 47; 8:24, 31; 9:35-38; 10:42; 11:25-27; 17:20, 21; 19:35; 20:29, 31). Yet another word in John’s gospel that expresses faith is “receive” (1:12).

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<sup>16</sup> J. Murray, “Repentance”, *NBD* (1962), p. 1084.

<sup>17</sup> W. Vine, “Pisteu,” *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Co., n.d.), p. 118.

## The Book of Acts

If indeed the four evangelists present the basic saving response to the gospel as faith and repentance, one should expect the historical narratives in the Acts to do the same, and this is exactly the case. It should come as no surprise to discover that the favorite description of Christians in Acts is “believers.”

<b>Event – People - Place</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>Passage</b>
Jerusalem, Day of Pentecost	Faith, repentance, baptism	2:37, 38, 41
Jerusalem, Jews	Believed the message	4:4
Jerusalem, Jews	Believed in the Lord	5:14
Jerusalem, priests	Obedient to the faith	6:7
Samaritans	Believed the good news, accepted the word of God, baptism	8:12, 14
Samaria, Simon	Believed, baptized	8:13
Gaza road, Ethiopian	Belief, baptism	8:36, 37
Damascus, Saul	Baptized	9:18
Lydda and Sharon, Jews	Turned to the Lord	9:35
Joppa, Jews	Belief in the Lord	9:42
Caesarea, Gentile God-fearers	Belief, received the word of God, baptism	10:43, 47, 48:11:1
Antioch, Greeks	Believed, turned to the Lord	11:21
Paphos, Sergius Paulus	Believed	13:12
Pisidian Antioch, Jews and Proselytes	Believed, converted	13:39, 43
Pisidian Antioch, Gentiles	Honored the word of God, believed	13:48
Iconium, Jews and Gentiles	Believed	14:1
Derbe	Put their trust in the Lord	14:21, 22, 23
Asia Minor, Gentiles	God opened the door of faith	14:27

Asia Minor, Gentiles	Converted, heard the message of the gospel and believed, purified by faith, saved by grace, turned to God	15:3, 7, 9, 11, 19
Thyatira, Lydia and her household	Opened her heart, baptized, believed	16:14, 15
Philippi, jailer and household	Believed, baptized	16:30-34
Thessalonica, Jews and Greeks	Were persuaded	17:4
Berea, Jews and Greeks	Believed	17:12
Athens, Greeks	Repented, believed	17:30, 34
Corinth, Jews and Greeks	Persuaded, believed, baptized	18:4, 8
Achaia	By grace believed	18:27
Ephesus	Heard the word of the Lord, believed	19:10, 18
Jerusalem, Jews	Believed	21:20
Gentiles	Turned from darkness to light and received forgiveness of sin	26:18
Damascus, Jerusalem, Judea, Gentile nations	Repent and turn to God	26:20
Rome, Jewish leaders	Convinced of the message	28:23, 24

The testimony in the Acts is amazingly consistent. The essential response to the gospel was faith and repentance. Many times Luke records that repentance and faith were expressed in the ordinance of water baptism.

### Paul's Letters

Without question the most significant word in Paul's writings which describes the saving response to the gospel is the word *pistis* (= faith)<sup>18</sup>. That faith is so crucial to Paul's understanding of salvation is evident in that the word appears 141

<sup>18</sup> Although it is not apparent in English, the Greek noun *pistis* (= faith) and the Greek verb *pisteuo* (= to believe) directly correspond to each other.



times in his letters. Likewise, the verb “to believe” appears 54 times. Essentially, Paul understands the death and resurrection of Christ as the ground for salvation, that is, the basis upon which salvation is possible. He understands faith as the means of salvation, that is, the way a person responds after hearing the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection so that Christ’s saving work will become effective for him/her personally.

It is worth reiterating that faith, in the biblical sense of the word, indicates not just intellectual agreement but rather “entrusting” and “committing.” This same verb “to believe,” in its passive form, is translated “entrusted” and “committed” (Ro. 3:2; 1 Co. 9:17; Ga. 2:17; 1 Th. 2:4; 1 Ti. 1:11; Tit. 1:3).

### Selected Key Passages

<i>Pisteuo</i> (= to believe)	<i>Pistis</i> (= faith)
Ro. 1:16, 4:5, 24, 9:33, 10:4, 9-11	Ro. 1:17, 3:22, 25, 26, 28, 30; 4:5, 5:1, 2
1 Co 1:21, 15:2	Ga. 2:15, 16, 20, 3:2, 8, 14, 24, 26
2 Co. 4:13	Ep. 2:8, 9
Ga. 2:16b, 3:22	Phil. 3:8, 9
Ep. 1:13	2 Th. 2:13
2 Th. 1:10	2 Ti. 3:15
1 Ti. 1:16	

Beyond the issue of faith, Paul is very adamant that one is not saved by religious performance (Ro. 4:5; 11:6; Ep. 2:9)

### The General Epistles

The general epistles follow the same pattern of grounding salvation in the death of Christ and describing the means of salvation as being by faith (He. 4:3; 10:39; 11:6; 1 Pe. 1:8, 9, 18-21; 2:6-8; 1 Jn. 3:23; 5:1, 13).

### The Value of Ordinances

The question arises that if the saving response to the gospel is faith, what is the value of the ordinances of water baptism and the Lord’s table? There are those who hold that faith alone is insufficient for salvation, and that the blessing of salvation is only conveyed by the outward physical act. This is called sacramentalism. However, it seems more accurate to see the ordinances as outward

acts which express inward faith, that is, that the acts are not saving in and of themselves but only insofar as they represent the faith of the person involved.

## **GOD’S PROMISE TO THE NATIONS**

Christianity is characterized by both exclusivism and evangelism. In the first place, orthodox Christian theology holds that there are not many ways to God, but one only--Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:17-18; 14:4-10; Ac. 17:24-31). Closely related to this idea is the conviction that Christians should share the way of salvation with those who do not know (Mt. 28:19-20; Ac. 13:46-47; Ro. 15:19h-20; 2 Co. 5:17-20; Col. 1:6b). In fact, one of the great expectations of Christians is that before the close of history the gospel will be proclaimed to all nations (Mt. 24:14; Mk. 13:10). It is important to observe how this dual posture of exclusivism and evangelism has developed in the history of salvation.

### **God’s Promise to Abram’s Family**

Even the casual reader is able to note that there is an abrupt transition between Genesis 11 and 12. In the primordial history of Israel, the ancient writer describes the origin of the universe and the human race (Ge. 1-2). He also describes the progressive rebellion of free human creatures who chose against God. The forbidden fruit (Ge. 3), fratricide, polygamy, revenge (Ge. 4), and the total depravity of human society (Ge. 6:1-7) led inevitably to divine judgment in the great flood (Ge. 6-9)

Still human degeneration did not cease. After the great flood, there arose power-hungry leaders (Ge. 10:8-12) and humanistic religions (Ge. 11:1-9). It is out of this milieu that God began a series of divine interventions which, while they started with one person, envisioned the reclamation of the whole human race.

### **Abram of Ur**

Near the beginning of the second millennium B.C., God revealed himself to a pagan in Ur of Mesopotamia, the son of a migrant family which was traveling northwest toward Haran (Ge. 11:27-28, 31; 12:1-5; Jos. 24:2-4; Ac. 7:2-3). In this divine self-disclosure, God made a great promise, a promise that was to be repeated several times in the subsequent history of the family (cf. Ge. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). The promise assured that there would be blessing for all nations through this man Abram and his offspring.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The Hebrew verb *barak* (to bless) in 12:3 may be translated as either a reflexive (i.e., “bless themselves, RSV) or a

## A Chosen Nation

In the providence of God, Abraham's family eventually descended into Egypt where they became slaves to the Pharaohs (Ge. 15:13-16; 46:26-27; Ex. 1:1-14). Here in their slavery, God once more intervened in history. Through Moses, God chose this family of slaves to be his own people, a nation which he redeemed from slavery because of his love (Dt. 7:7-8). While the nation was to be selected out of all the nations of the world to be Yahweh's special people, they were also to function as priests for the rest of the nations of the world (Ex. 19:3-6). Because of their continual breaking of their covenant with Yahweh, this latter ideal was never realized. To be sure, hints of this ideal are to be found in the books of Ruth and Jonah, narratives which describe the blessings of God's redemptive power and forgiveness for foreigners. However, these were the exceptions. Instead of becoming a mediator between the nations and God, Israel became dispossessed of her land in the exile and scattered among the nations (La. 2:1-10)

## The Servant of Yahweh

It is in the disaster of exile that God's peculiar promise to the nations was revived. In the latter part of Isaiah, a remarkable figure is described as the *Ebed Yahweh* (= Servant of the Lord), a figure who would establish God's promise to the nations (Is. 42:1, 4, 6-7). The servant-figure is portrayed in two ways, and the prophet's description of him moves back and forth between a representation of the nation Israel in whom God would display his glory (Is. 44:1; 49:3) and a representation of a missionary who would call the nation Israel back to her faith in God (Is. 49:5-6). In this way the oracle embraces both the ideal of the nation as a priest to the world and the ideal of someone who would serve as a savior to Israel herself. Of paramount importance is the universal scope of the servant's mission (Is. 49:6). Even more striking is the fact that the servant's universal mission would be associated with his vicarious suffering for the sins of others (52:13-15; 53:3-12). The hope put before the reader is that in the end all the nations would see the glory of God (Is. 66:18-21)

## The Rise of Judaism

In the rise of Judaism in the intertestamental period, the universalism of God's promise to the nations was buried under the rubble of Jewish nationalism. The rift between Jews and Gentiles widened almost immeasurably, augmented by the efforts of the Greeks to Hellenize the Jews (an effort which the Jews bitterly

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passive (i.e., "be blessed," NIV, KJV). Both the LXX and the NT understand it as passive (cf. Ac. 3:25; Ga. 3:8), cf. D. Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1967), p. 114.

resented) and by the military mastery of the Romans.<sup>20</sup> In Jewish apocalyptic writings, the hope was not for the conversion of the nations but for their destruction in the last great divine intervention when the structures of the world would be destroyed and judged by God.<sup>21</sup> Only the faithful of Israel would be saved.

## **The Kingdom of God is Preached**

The ministry of John the Baptist was both challenging and unsettling. It was a challenge that the time of the dawn of the kingdom of God, for which the Jewish nation feverishly waited, had arrived (Mt. 3:1-2). It was equally disconcerting, for John announced that God was quite capable of rearranging the bloodlines of the family of Abraham (Mt. 3:7-9). In fact, God was already chopping down the Jewish family tree with its assumption of unconditional security (Mt. 3:10). A holy fire of judgment from God's Spirit was coming which would discriminate between the grain and the chaff (Mt. 3:11-12). All were called upon to repent, Jewish or not (Mk. 1:4-5).

## **Jesus and the New Community of Faith**

The central message of Jesus was the coming of the kingdom of God (Mk. 1:14-15; Mt. 4:17, 23-25; Lk. 4:43). The kingdom or reign of God<sup>22</sup> had begun in Jesus' power over Satan (Lk. 11:20-22). The followers of Jesus were to announce this message in their travels (Mt. 10:7; Lk. 10:9). In this preaching of the reign of God, Jesus, like the Baptist before him, called into question the Jewish assumption that the descendants of Abraham were alone the chosen people of God. To be born of the family of Abraham was not sufficient; one had to be spiritually born by faith (Jn. 3:1-18). To be truly the children of Abraham was vastly more than being merely the descendants of Abraham (Jn. 8:31-56). The family of the messiah was to be established along the lines of discipleship, not along the lines of traditional Jewishness (Mk. 3:31-35).

In a variety of metaphors, Jesus described the new community of faith which he was gathering around himself. The nucleus was the 12 apostles (Mk. 3:13-19), and the number 12 bore tremendous significance as the primordial number of the

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<sup>20</sup> A relatively brief but insightful description of this bitter antagonism can be found in D. Russell, *Between the Testaments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), pp. 13-57.

<sup>21</sup> See L. Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 39-49.

<sup>22</sup> The Greek term *basileia* (= kingdom) means reign or rule rather the realm or people. It carries the notion of regal power and authority, cf. G. Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), pp. 77-81.

clans in ancient times. This new people of God was described as the flock (Lk. 12:32) which was being gathered (Mt. 12:30; Jn. 10:7, 9) and for which the shepherd would gladly lay down his life (Jn. 10:11, 14-15, 17-18). Significantly, this flock would be composed of more than merely Jewish sheep (Jn. 10:16). The new community was like a throng of wedding guests (Mk. 2:19), and not everyone who expected to be part of the community would be accepted (Mt. 7:21-23; 25:1-13).<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, Jesus explicitly indicated that the nations would share in the reign of God. Gentiles would be accepted by God in the resurrection even before Jews who did not believe in Jesus (Mt. 10:15; 11:22; 12:41-42). All nations would stand before the Son of Man in the great judgment, and some of them would be saved (Mt. 25:31-34). Even more significant, some of Abraham's natural descendants would be condemned (Lk. 16:22-24; cf. 13:6-9).<sup>24</sup> Even in the OT, God had not been tied to the natural descendants of Abraham (Lk. 4:25-27), and neither was Jesus (Mt. 8:5-13; 15:21-28).

### **Jesus, the Servant of Yahweh**

Against this background of Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God, it is not difficult to imagine how the early Christians saw in Jesus the fulfillment of the Servant of Yahweh. The testimony of the apostles was that in his death Jesus had been delivered up according to "God's set purpose and foreknowledge" (Ac. 2:23; cf. 3:13), a clear allusion to the vicarious suffering of the Servant. Philip had no hesitancy in declaring to the African Chancellor that the suffering servant was Jesus (Ac. 8:26-35). Paul and Barnabas considered the mission of Jesus, the Servant, to be their own mission, as is evidenced by their quotation of one of the Servant Songs (Ac. 13:46-48; cf. Is. 49:6). Jesus himself had set the pattern for such an interpretation by his continual emphasis that his death was a necessary fulfillment to the Scriptures (Lk. 22:37//Is. 53:12; Lk. 24:45-46; Mt. 16:21; 17:12, 22-23; 20:17-19, 28; Mk. 10:45//Is. 53:12b; Mk. 14:48-49). The gospel accounts bear out this connection in narrative form as well (Mk. 14:65//Is. 50:6; Lk. 9:53//Is. 50:7; Mk. 15:28//Is. 53:12; Jn. 1:29//Is. 53:7; Jn. 19:38-42//Is. 53:9). Other NT writers pick up the same theme (cf. Ro. 4:25//Is. 53:12; Ro. 8:3//Is. 53:10; 2 Co. 5:21//Is. 53:10; Gal. 1:3//Is. 53:5, 8; He. 9:28//Is. 53:12; 1 Pe. 2:24//Is. 53:4, 12).

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<sup>23</sup> Other metaphors Jesus used are God's planting, the net, the building, the city of God, and members of the new covenant, cf. J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribners, 1971), pp. 168-169.

<sup>24</sup> It is not without significance to note that popular Jewish belief in the time of Jesus was that no descendant of Abraham could be lost, cf. J. Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), p. 48.

## The Great Commission

If Jesus was the Servant of Yahweh, and the earliest Christians had no doubt that he was, then the mission of the new community of Jesus was a universal one. This universality is directly stated in the post-Easter words of Jesus, often referred to as “the great commission.” Each of the four gospels and the Acts contain a form of the great commission, and while none of them are identical, they all agree in substance.

### *The Commission in Matthew*

In 28:18-20, at a mountain in Galilee (28:16), Jesus directed his 11 apostles to make disciples of all nations.<sup>25</sup> This discipling of the nations would include the initiatory rite of water baptism, which embodies the meaning of the gospel in symbolic form, and the careful teaching of the words of Jesus.

### *The Commission in Mark*

In 16:15-16, in the collection of Jesus post-resurrection appearances that appear in the longer ending of Mark’s gospel, there is a similar instruction to the 11 apostles to go into the whole world and proclaim the good news.<sup>26</sup>

The appropriate response is faith and baptism.

### *The Commission in Luke*

In 24:46-48, again to the 11 apostles (although in this case there were others present also, cf. 24:33), Jesus instructed them that repentance and forgiveness was to be preached to all the nations. Power would be given to his witnesses to perform their mission (24:49).<sup>27</sup>

### *The Commission in John*

John’s version of the commission seems to have occurred on the evening of

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<sup>25</sup> The syntax of the verbs in 28:19 is worth noting: the verb “to make disciples” is imperative, and thus becomes the central thrust of the commission. The verbs “to go,” and “to baptize” and “to teach” are circumstantial participles, and thus coincident with the imperative verb.

<sup>26</sup> The collection of appearances in the longer ending of Mark’s gospel need not be read as though they all occurred on a single day. These were probably collected as independent traditions and added to the original edition of Mark’s gospel, the earliest manuscripts of which end at 16:8.

<sup>27</sup> It is difficult to know whether this account of the great commission was given on the evening of resurrection day or later since Luke coalesces the initial post-resurrection appearances with the ascension. Luke is aware, of course, of the intervening time period between the two events (Ac. 1:3).

resurrection day (20:21). The sending of the Son into the world by God the Father becomes the pattern for the apostles, for as the Father sent the Son, so Christ sent his followers. The missionaries were to be empowered by the Holy Spirit (20:22), and their proclamation would result in the forgiveness of sins (20:23).

### *The Commission in Acts*

In 1:8, at the scene of the ascension, Jesus once more instructed his apostles that they were to be witnesses to the ends of the earth after they had received the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. In this version of the commission, there is a geographical progression that describes the mission: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and beyond.

## **Implications of the Great Commission**

The Christian church has from the very beginning considered the Great Commission to be its spiritual mission to the world. While modern interpreters may wish to redirect the mission of the church toward political and class liberation, social concern and humanitarianism, however worthy these causes may be, the evangelical church remains firmly committed to the biblical conviction that the only real hope for humanity is in the saving grace of our Lord's death and resurrection, a saving grace that does not merely change things, but that changes people. The Book of Jonah testifies to this eloquently in that the entire answer to social sin is not a new social structure or a new government,<sup>28</sup> but the conversion to God of an entire people and its government.' Similarly, while there is biblical reason to believe that slavery and oppression should be decried, the real answer to even these social problems in the NT is the gospel which changes the way people think about things rather than a new social order which attempts to enforce by law the way people behave (cf. 1 Co. 7:21-24).

Having said this, however, it must still be addressed how the new community of faith is to respond to Christ's Great Commission.

## **The Response of the Earliest Christians**

One of the themes of Luke's second work is to describe how the early church broke out of her boundaries of nationalism and provincialism. The geographical order of evangelism (Ac. 1:8) was accomplished, not by the apostles' eager pursuit of a universal mission, but by divine intervention which forced the early Christian community out of its comfort zone. Persecution pushed the early Christians out of

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<sup>28</sup> J. Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, trans. D. Pardee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 69.

Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria (Ac. 8:1, 4-5). The apostles were subsequently instrumental in maintaining the unity of the church as it spread beyond the acceptable Jewish boundaries (Ac. 8:14-17).<sup>29</sup>

From Judea, Galilee and Samaria (Ac. 9:31), the gospel was proclaimed among the God-fearers, yet another step away from Jewish nationalism (Ac. 10).<sup>30</sup> At about the same time, those fleeing persecution traveled to Syrian Antioch where the gospel was proclaimed to Greeks in addition to Jews (Ac. 11:19-21). The apostles in Jerusalem, as might be expected, sent an envoy to investigate, but once again the unity of the church was maintained (Ac. 11:22-26). From the multi-national and multi-racial church in Antioch (Ac. 13:1), a missionary team was dispatched to Asia Minor on what would afterwards be known as Paul's first missionary journey (Ac. 13:2-3). Paul conducted two more church-planting missions as well as a final trip to Rome, all of which were major missionary endeavors.

### **The Meaning of “Apostle” in the NT**

The word “apostle” generally describes a messenger, an ambassador or an envoy in both classical and NT Greek.<sup>31</sup> Quite literally, it means “one sent forth,” being composed of the verb *stello* (= I send) and the preposition *apo* (from). In the NT, the word is used in especially two ways, first in a rather technical sense, and second in a more general sense.

#### *The Twelve Apostles*

The choosing of the 12 apostles by Jesus symbolized the nucleus of a new community of faith, just as the 12 sons of Jacob were chosen as the nucleus of the old community (Mt. 10:2; Lk. 6:13; Ac. 1:2). These 12 men were especially gifted to perform miracles, healings and exorcisms, and they were commissioned to proclaim the good news about the kingdom of God (Mt. 10:7, 8; Lk. 9:1-2; Ac.

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<sup>29</sup> The temporary withholding of the Holy Spirit from the Samaritans until the arrival of the apostles from Jerusalem seems to have been necessary to avoid creating a Samaritan church separate from the Jewish church, cf. F. Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 173-181.

<sup>30</sup> The designation *phoboumenoi* (= those fearing, Ac. 10:2) seems to designate a class of gentiles who, while not prepared to enter the Jewish community as full proselytes, nevertheless accepted Jewish monotheism and the ethical standard of the Jewish way of life, cf. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 215-216. There is independent evidence of this class in the Talmudic references to *yirei shamayim* (= those who fear heaven) as well as in the inscriptions on excavated synagogues which mention the *theosebeis* (= God worshipers), the *sebomenoi ton theon* (those reverencing God) and the *metuentes* (= those who fear), cf. R. Tannenbaurt, “Jews and God-Fearers in the Holy City of Aphrodite” and L. Feldman, “The Omnipresence of the God-Fearers,” *BAR* (Sept./Oct. 1986 XII.5), pp. 54-63.

<sup>31</sup> H. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); J. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930).



10:42; 2 Co. 12:12). Furthermore, they were marked by the unique qualifications of having been with Jesus in his earthly ministry (Mk. 3:14; Ac. 1:21-22) and by having been eyewitnesses of his resurrection (Ac. 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 10:39-41; 13:30-31). It is possible that the 12 apostles sensed that they possessed a special function in witnessing to the people of Israel (cf. Mt. 19:28), but for whatever reason, they did not scatter from Jerusalem during the early days of persecution (Ac. 8:1, 14; 15:2; 16:4). The tradition of the church indicates that they later were dispersed throughout the world as missionaries.<sup>32</sup>

### *Other Apostles*

Besides the narrowly defined college of apostles called “the Twelve”, of which there could be no more or no less (Re. 21:14), there is a broader understanding of the word apostle in the NT which encompasses the function of special leaders, ambassadors and missionaries. These include Paul and Barnabas (Ac. 14:4, 14), Andronicus and Junia (Ro. 16:7), the representatives overseeing the offering being taken to Jerusalem (2 Co. 8:23), James the Lord’s brother and leader of the Jerusalem church (Ga. 1:19; cf. 1 Co. 15:7), Epaphroditus of Philippi (Phil. 2:25) and Silas and Timothy (1 Th. 1:1; 2:7).<sup>33</sup> Paul describes his own apostleship in terms of his missionary task (Ro. 1:1; 11:13; Ga. 1:15-17; 2:7-8; 1 Ti. 2:7; 2 Ti. 1:11), and on one occasion he declared that even if no one else recognized him as an apostle, he should be so recognized by those with whom he had shared the gospel (1 Co. 9:1-2).

On the other hand, one should hesitate to say that the term apostle, even in its more general usage, means nothing more than the modern term missionary. Apostles carried a certain authority which seems to be over and beyond the task of preaching (Ga. 2:9). Apostleship is listed as the first of the spiritual gifts (1 Co. 12:28), and it is not open to all Christians (1 Co. 12:29).

Whatever else the term apostle may mean, at a minimum it refers to those who are especially called to responsibly direct the mission of the church. Peter performed a special role in evangelizing the Jewish community, while Paul performed a special role in evangelizing the Gentile community (Ga. 2:7-8).

### **The Early Christians’ Approach to Evangelism**

That the early Christian communities developed a growing commitment to the

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<sup>32</sup> P. Schaff, ed., “The Church History of Eusebius (3.1),” *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 1.132-133.

<sup>33</sup> Though the English translations may vary, in all these passages the Greek term *apostolos* is used of the persons named.

Great Commission cannot be denied (Ac. 2:39). To be sure, their understanding of it seems to have broadened from Jewry to various groups beyond Jewry until it encompassed the Gentile world. Furthermore, an early crisis which arose over this issue had to be addressed. There existed a faction which contended that the gospel was only for those who had accepted the Jewish faith. This faction demanded that in order to become a Christian, one must first become a Jew (Ac. 15:1; Ga. 2:11-13; 4:17; 6:12-13; Tit. 1:10-11). Because the apostles, especially Paul, vehemently denounced this notion (Ac. 15:2-21; Ga. 1:6-10; 5:1-12), the evangelistic outreach toward the Gentile community continued with vigor (Ro. 15:19). It was so successful that Paul could say that the mission was “producing fruit all over the world” (Col. 1:6). Following are some considerations as to how the Christian gospel was propagated.

### *Patterns in the Ministry of Jesus*

Jesus was quite emphatic that the spiritual mission of the new community of faith had been inaugurated in his own ministry. In the parable of the sower, Jesus described himself as proclaiming the message about God’s reign (Mt. 13:3-9, 18-23). In Sychar, he challenged his disciples about the eagerness of the Samaritans to hear the word of the kingdom, an eagerness that was compared to a ripe harvest field ready for reaping. The metaphor of the ripe grain depicted the Samaritans’ eagerness to hear and believe (Jn. 4:35-42).

From among his many followers, Jesus sent out the 12 apostles as missionaries in Galilee to share in his evangelistic ministry (Mt. 6:6b-13). In Judea, he appointed 70 disciples to go out and evangelize with the prayer that the Master of the field would send reapers (Lk. 10:1-2). On some occasions he instructed individuals to share the report of the good things that God had done for them (Mk. 5:18-20). On other occasions, he called for silence, though this was apparently not generally successful (Mk. 1:43-45; 5:43; 7:36-37). When these kinds of accounts were remembered and read in the early Christian communities, it seems reasonable to assume that the Christian hearers would extrapolate from these stories the idea that they, too, were sharing in the mission of Jesus, the Servant of Yahweh, a mission which reached beyond Palestine to the nations.

### *The Growth of the Jerusalem Church*

The nucleus of disciples which was left after Jesus’ ascension waited in Jerusalem for Pentecost. On the Day of Pentecost their numbers increased dramatically following a sermon by Peter who stood with the other apostles and preached the good news about Jesus (Ac. 2:14, 41). Within a short period of time,

the preaching of Peter and John caused the number to grow from 3000 to 5000 (Ac. 4:1-4). While the entire church was involved at some level in witnessing to God's good news through the power of the Holy Spirit (Ac. 4:31), it seems to have been the apostles who were especially effective in preaching (Ac. 4:33; 5:18-20). A popular place for such preaching was Solomon's Colonnade in the temple (Ac. 3:11; 5:12, 20-21, 25), and many people gathered there to hear the apostles and to bring their sick for healing (Ac. 5:13-16).<sup>34</sup> Though challenged by the Jewish Sanhedrin, the apostles continued to teach in both the temple courts and in homes (Ac. 5:41-42). Steadily the number of believers grew (Ac. 6:7).

With the persecution associated with the martyrdom of Stephen, the leaders of the Hellenistic Jewish party of Christians were scattered toward the nearby rural areas (Ac. 6:5-6; 8:1). Those who fled took their cue from the apostles and continued to share the good news wherever they went (Ac. 8:4). These Hellenistic Jewish leaders began to form Christian communities in uncharted territories, such as Samaria (Ac. 8:5). An African chancellor, probably either a proselyte or a God-fearer, embraced the faith after hearing Philip's explanation, and he continued homeward toward Ethiopia (Ac. 8:27, 36-39). Philip continued to preach the gospel, heading north along the coastal road and preaching in the cities through which he passed (Ac. 8:40). In time, groups of Palestinian Jewish Christians were to be found in Damascus (Ac. 9:1-2, 19), Lydda (Ac. 9:32), Sharon (Ac. 9:35), Joppa (Ac. 9:42-43), Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (Ac. 11:19). It was the Hellenistic Jewish leaders who first crossed the religious boundaries of Judaism in order to preach the gospel to non-Jewish groups (Ac. 11:20-21). Barnabas, a native of Cyprus (Ac. 4:36), was sent to Antioch to investigate (Ac. 11:22-23), and he, too, became used of God to preach in this new field (Ac. 11:24). The Christian groups continued to grow steadily throughout Palestine (Ac. 12:24).

### *Paul's Strategy of Church Planting*

Paul (not to mention Luke) seems to have been concerned with strategic provinces as critical footholds in the spread of the gospel. On his first journey, Paul evangelized in Cyprus (Ac. 13:4-6), Pisidia (Ac. 13:14), south Galatia (Ac. 14:1, 6-7), and Pamphylia (Ac. 14:24-25). On his second, Paul visited several established churches in Syria, Cilicia and south Galatia in order to deliver to them the encyclical of the Jerusalem council (Ac. 15:40-41; 16:1, 4-6a). Ending up at Troas on the coast of the Aegean, he received a vision to embark for Macedonia (Ac.

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<sup>34</sup> It is not unlikely that the striking events of Pentecost itself occurred in one of the temple courts, given the fact that Luke specifically describes the daytime location of the apostles as being there (Lk. 24:53) though, of course, he seems to indicate that they spent the night elsewhere (Ac. 1:13).

16:9-10). After planting churches there, he traveled south to Achaia (Ac. 17:15), from where he sailed for home (Ac. 18:18).

In all these travels, Paul seems particularly to have believed that the effectiveness of his preaching was directly related to what he perceived as God's will for him in a particular time and place (1 Co. 16:7-9; 2 Co. 2:12-13; Col. 4:3-4; Ep. 6:19-20). His desire to turn east toward Asia and Bithynia was not realized due to divine intervention (Ac. 16:6b-7). His church planting in Macedonia was due to a vision (Ac. 16:9-10). Though there seems to have been an open door at Ephesus, he declined to stay, only promising to return "if it is God's will" (Ac. 18:19-21).

On the third journey, Paul revisited his various congregations, hoping ultimately to be able to go to Rome (Ac. 18:23; 19:1, 21-22; 20:1-6). After strengthening the churches in these established areas, by his own testimony he asserted that he had "fully proclaimed the gospel so that there was no more place for me to work in these regions" (Ro. 15:19, 23; cf. Ac. 19:10). His desire to visit Rome was not so much to evangelize there as to find a base from which to go further west toward Spain, areas as yet untouched by the gospel (Ro. 15:20-22, 23-24).

Several things may be observed about Paul's church planting.<sup>35</sup> First, his evangelistic work was focused upon strategic provincial footholds within the limits of Roman administration. Second, his mission was not to preach in every place personally, but to establish centers of Christian life in a number of important cities from which the gospel might be spread into the surrounding country (2 Co. 10:15-16; 1 Th. 1:6-8; Col. 1:6-8)<sup>36</sup> Third, all of the cities and towns in which Paul planted churches were centers of Roman administration, Greek civilization, Jewish influence and commercial importance. These factors combine to give the impression that Paul approached his missionary work in something other than a haphazard way. It would seem that Paul was concerned to establish congregations in key areas which in turn would disseminate the Christian message to adjacent areas.

### **The Question of Individual Responsibility**

At this point one must address what may prove to be a most difficult and controversial question. Exactly what is the responsibility of the individual believer in regard to the Great Commission? It may be granted that the Great Commission is

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<sup>35</sup> R. Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 12-17.

<sup>36</sup> Paul apparently did not evangelize in Colossae (Col. 2:1), but the congregation in Colossae was established by Epaphras, a native Colossian (Col. 1:5-7; 4:12), who was probably sent out during Paul's extended stay in the neighboring Ephesus (Ac. 19:9-10, 26).

the spiritual mission of the church. It may be granted that God has called special individuals to do the work of evangelism (cf. 2 Ti. 1:6-8; 4:5). It may be noted that leaders other than apostles were actively involved in the proclamation of the good news about Jesus (Ac. 8:4). Does this mean, then, that every believer ought to be a salesperson, that is, that every believer ought to aggressively take the initiative to verbally challenge as many as he or she meets with the message of salvation? Such an assumption is not uncommon in evangelicalism. A well respected evangelical author states, “Every man and woman [in the early church] saw it as his task to bear witness to Jesus Christ by every means at his or her disposal.”<sup>37</sup> Is such a statement historically true? Is it substantiated by the NT and by church history?

Part of the reason for raising this question is the frequent practice in fundamentalist churches of guilt-building as a motive for evangelism. Christians not infrequently are urged to become, aggressive one-on-one witnesses, to participate in “every believer is a soul winner” campaigns, and to consider themselves to be individually responsible for the salvation of the whole world. Part of the reason for raising this question is also the tacit acceptance by many evangelicals that conversions depend upon salesmanship and techniquism, a posture that has its roots in extreme Arminianism and the American way of life more than in the Bible.<sup>38</sup> Not a few Christians have suffered severe depression because their personalities did not lend themselves to extroversion, and consequently, their failure at aggressive salesmanship left them to be evaluated as spiritually inferior by their Christian peers, not to mention condemned in their own hearts.

On the other hand, the church is responsible to witness to the good news about Jesus within an unregenerate world. The remaining discussion has not so much to do with the mission of the church as with the method of the church. Given that we understand clearly the church’s spiritual mission, how did the early church go about accomplishing it and how should we?

### *An Important Distinction*

A distinction should be made between what can be termed “confrontational evangelism” and “lifestyle evangelism”. Confrontational evangelism is the kind which calls upon a believer to take the verbal initiative in sharing the gospel. It is aggressive in character. In this model, one does not testify to Christ because he or

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<sup>37</sup> M. Green, *Evangelism Now & Then* (Downers Grove, IL:IVP, 1979), p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> By extreme Arminianism is meant the theological position which holds that the human will has not been distorted by the fall and is not held in bondage under sin. Such a position assumes that all persons may come to God for salvation at whatever time they so desire, that is, that salvation arises from human rather than from divine initiative.

she has been asked to do so by an unbeliever, but rather, he or she bluntly confronts the non-believer with the Christian message.

Lifestyle evangelism, on the other hand, seeks to *be* good news before *sharing* good news. The Christian lifestyle itself, shining forth in love and good works, becomes a magnet toward which unbelievers are irresistibly drawn (Mt. 5:14-16; Jn. 13:34-35; 1 Pe. 2:12). In this attraction, the question of faith will eventually arise, and when it does, the believer is to be prepared with the Christian good news (cf. 1 Pe. 3:1-2, 15-16).

### *Aggressive Evangelism is Not the Task of the Many*

There seems to be scant evidence in the NT that the members of the various congregations in Palestine, Asia Minor and Greece were all involved in aggressive evangelism. There is no descriptive narrative by Luke and no urging by Paul or other authors of the NT that this should be the task of every believer. Many of the verses that are used to support this kind of approach are rudely pulled from their contexts so that they are made to serve ideas for which they were not created. Unfortunately, the popular ideology that confrontational evangelism is for everyone has burdened so many believers whose personalities were not suited to such tactics that they have withdrawn from evangelism altogether. No one likes to be mugged, and to their deep chagrin, many Christians have awoken to the fact that they have themselves been the muggers -evangelical muggers, perhaps, but muggers just the same.

Confrontational evangelism in the NT seems to have been for those whom God called to it, persons whom the churches recognized as being gifted in this way. It included apostles, such as Paul and Barnabas, as well as others who served as missionaries. There is no direct evidence that it was practiced or even intended to be practiced by all believers.

### *Selective Evangelism*

It would seem that even Paul, perhaps the greatest of the NT missionaries, was selective in his evangelistic efforts. If one traces the geographical progress of his journeys, it will immediately be observed that he did not preach in every city through which he passed, and as was observed earlier, was even prohibited by God from going into some provinces. The notion that every NT believer considered every non-believer to be an immediate target for aggressive evangelism seems to be an overstatement of the case. Timing and the inner urging of the Holy Spirit seem to be significant factors in the sharing of the gospel. So, too, is the sovereign working of God, for no one can come to true faith in Christ unless the Father draws

him or her (Jn. 6:44).

### *The Primary Responsibility*

The primary responsibility for all believers is for them to be Christians--to be like Jesus Christ (Ac. 11:26b; 2 Co. 3:18). If believers in the church would give their efforts more toward being the Christians into which Christ would like to mold them, they would have to spend less time on learning techniques of salesmanship with which to share the good news. Their very lives would be letters read by all, including the unbelieving community (2 Co. 3:2-3). To be sure, the church must not forget that God calls special persons to perform the task of proclamational evangelism. These persons may be either preachers or laypersons. However, he has called all believers to be Christians. Christ has called for his followers to be “in” the world but not “of” it. Christians are sometimes “of” the world because they rely on its techniques, and they are not truly “in” it because they have formed themselves into an isolated subculture which does not touch the non-Christian world. To the contrary, Christ was in the world, full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14). And while he was in the world, he ate with tax-collectors and sinners (Mt. 9:10-13). Even Paul encouraged his converts to be involved in the building of positive relationships with unbelievers without necessarily urging them toward aggressive evangelism (1 Co. 10:27-30 ).<sup>39</sup>

## **Grace and Perseverance**

A difficult and controversial question is whether or not a true Christian can apostatize and thereby incur the condemnation of God. Though the question can be phrased in several ways, the essence of the issue has to do with the nature of God’s grace and the biblical imperative that believers should persevere. The evidence of the NT is paradoxical, to say the least. When one addresses such a question, it is somewhat like viewing the tip of a large iceberg which extends visibly above the surface of the North Atlantic Sea. Below the surface, there is an invisible mass of material of which the visible tip is only a small part. Theologically, the question here entertained is regarding the so-called doctrine of eternal security. Beneath the surface, however, looms the much larger question of the nature of God’s sovereignty and the nature of human freedom.

The question is not a new one. It goes back in Christian history at least to the time of Augustine and Pelagius (4th century A.D. ). It became the cause for a

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<sup>39</sup> Two worthwhile evangelical works on lifestyle evangelism are: J. Aldrich, *Life-Style Evangelism* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1981); R. Pippert, *Out of the Salt-shaker & Into the World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979).

major doctrinal controversy within Protestantism (Calvinism vs. Arminianism, late 16th century A.D.). It still theologically separates various Christian denominations. Our purpose here is to become better informed regarding this issue; it is not to fortify our own presuppositions, and it is certainly not to further divide Christians from each other. In fact, we may not even be able to provide a definitive answer at the end. Rather, our goal is a more humble one. We wish to gain a better grasp of the biblical material concerning this issue, and in the process, we shall hopefully appreciate both the grace of God and human freedom in greater measure than before. The final word will be left up to God himself, and such a conclusion is singularly appropriate.

## **The Proof-texts of the Issue**

A proof-text is a passage of scripture which, when it is isolated from its context, seems to support a particular theological position. Much of the argumentation related to the question of eternal security versus falling from grace arises from the marshalling of proof-texts. Taken together, certain proof-texts seem to point to a single conclusion. As one examines these proof-texts, a warning must be issued. Precisely because proof-texting involves the isolation of passages from their context, a final answer must not be derived from such a method. Nevertheless, in looking at the proof-texts one can at least discover the skeleton upon which the muscles of the two positions are stretched.<sup>40</sup>

## **Falling from Grace**

Variouslly labeled “backsliding” (an OT rather than a NT expression) and “apostasy,” the position suggested by this set of proof-texts seems to indicate that a person, after coming to faith in God and Jesus Christ, can reject the Christian faith and so endanger his or her salvation. This position seeks to establish that salvation is conditional rather than unconditional; it is conditioned upon the enduring faithfulness and fidelity of the believer to Jesus Christ. Thus, warnings are given in the NT to believers to remain faithful to Christ--or else suffer the condemnation of God (Mt. 10:22; 12:43-45; 24:4-5, 10-13; 26:41; Jn. 15:6; Ac. 1:15-20; 5:3-5, 9-10; 8:13, 18-23; Ro. 8:12-13; 11:17-22; 1 Co. 3:16-17; 8:9-11; 9:24--10:13; 2 Co. 13:5; Ga. 1:6-9; 4:8-11, 17-20; 5:2-4, 19-21; 6:1, 7-8; Col. 1:21-23; 1 Th. 3:2-5, 8; 1 Ti. 1:19-20; 4:1; 6:11-12; 6:20-21; 2 Ti. 2:17-18; 4:10; He. 2:1-3; 3:7--4:1; 6:4-8, 11-12; 10:26-31, 35-38; 12:25; 1 Pe. 5:8; 2 Pe. 1:10-11; 2:20-22; 3:14, 17; Jude 5-7,

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<sup>40</sup> No attempt will be made here to be exhaustive in the listing of proof-texts. However, what seem to be the more direct ones will be surveyed.



21; Re. 2:4-5, 14-16, 20-23; 3:1-3, 15-17).

### **Eternal Security**

Sometimes described as the doctrine of “once saved, always saved,” the position suggested by this set of proof-texts seems to indicate that when a person truly comes to faith in Jesus Christ, one is divinely guarded so that he or she cannot lose salvation and be condemned. As such, salvation is not conditional but unconditional. It is established through grace, maintained through grace, and consummated through grace. Here, it is asserted that eternal life can never be defined as conditional life. Those who appear to reject the Christian faith never truly had it in the first place. Thus, the believer is emphatically assured of his or her eternal salvation (Jn. 3:14-16; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 10:27-29; 17:2, 12; Ac. 13:48; Ro. 6:5, 23; 8:1-2, 29-39; 11:29; 1 Co. 1:8-9; 10:13; 2 Co. 1:21-22; 5:5; Ep. 1:4-6, 11-14; 4:30; 5:25-27; Phil. 1:6; 1 Th. 1:4-5; 5:23-24; 2 Th. 3:3; 2 Ti. 1:12; 4:18; He. 7:25; 1 Pe. 1:3-5, 13; 1 Jn. 2:19, 3:14, 18-19; 5:4, 13, 18-19; Jude 1, 24).

### **Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom**

Beneath the question of eternal security versus falling from grace is the larger question of divine sovereignty and human freedom. The term sovereignty means supreme power, that is, power to act freely apart from external control. Christians agree that God alone possesses the supreme power in the universe. However, Christians experience some difficulty in agreeing on how God’s power is administered in human history, a history that seems particularly marked by human decisions and their consequences. Following is a brief exploration of these two important categories.

#### **Divine Sovereignty**

In the first place, the Bible everywhere affirms the sovereignty of God, an affirmation of which the following passages are but a suggestive selection (Ps. 22:28; 47:7-8; 103:19; Jb. 42:2; 1 Chr. 29:11-12; Is. 40:22-26; Da. 5:21; Mt. 6:13; Ac. 17:24-26; 1 Ti. 6:15; Re. 4:11; 19:16). Traditionally, Christians have described the sovereignty of God in terms of his omnipotence (he is able to do whatever he wills), omniscience (he has infinite knowledge), omnipresence (everyplace is accessible to him at once) and immutability (he is unchangeable in essence, attributes, consciousness and will).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> For a fuller discussion of each of these terms, see H. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. V. Doerksen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 80-83.

However, each of these terms must be carefully defined if a position of fatalism is to be avoided and if the freedom of human history is to be viewed as anything other than an illusion.<sup>42</sup> If divine sovereignty is conceived to be absolute power which swallows up all other power, then God's sovereignty would be little more than whim or caprice. God's power should be distinguished from power itself, for he is in control of his own power; God is not the prisoner of his own power.<sup>43</sup> The sovereignty of God, then, is the freedom of God to do anything he so chooses to accomplish his holy and loving purposes in the universe. God is free to enter history whenever and however he chooses, but he has not chosen to enter history at every point, that is, he does not enter history in order to totally manipulate it.

Similarly, God's omnipresence means that God is free to enter every place because every place is within his grasp and power; it does not mean that God is indistinguishable from his created universe, as the pantheist would say. His omniscience means that nothing can be concealed from him; it does not mean that every aspect of the future is locked into a concrete chain of events which excludes the free movement of history. God's immutability means that he is completely faithful and constant, true to himself; it does not mean that he is immobile or that he cannot perform new things in new ways. If the latter were true, the incarnation would never have occurred.

## **Human Freedom**

It may be helpful at this point to differentiate between freedom and autonomy. Freedom is the power to do some things, while autonomy is the power to do anything. Because God is sovereign, human freedom must always be viewed as a limited freedom. Human freedom must not be confused with human autonomy; humans may be free, but they are not autonomous. Humans, who were made in the image of God, have been given dominion over the earth (Ge. 1:28; 2:15-17; Ps. 8:5-8). They make free choices which affect their future (Ge. 11:1-7; Jos. 24:15; 1 Sa. 8:6-9; Lk. 15:11-20; 1 Pe. 4:3). However, their wills are at the same time in bondage to sin so that while they have limited freedom to make choices in the world, they do not have the ability to return to God under their own power. God says of Israel, for instance, that the nation is like an oven that burns without kindling (Ho. 7:4, 6), like a senseless dove which is easily deceived (Ho. 7:11), and

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<sup>42</sup> There have been those who have defined God's sovereignty in precisely this way and who indeed view human history as only the illusion of freedom. However, such a view encroaches upon the Biblical affirmation of God's essential goodness and makes God the designer of Auschwitz, Hiroshima and other historical evils. In such a view, good and evil lose their definition, and God and Satan become indistinguishable.

<sup>43</sup> D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) 1:27-28.

like a faulty bow which cannot shoot straight (Ho. 7:16). To be sure, there is an inherent nobility in humans which derives from the fact that they are created in God's image. Even unregenerate humans are capable of doing good things (Mt. 7:11). Nevertheless, they are permeated with the corruption of sin (Ps. 14:1-3; 36:1-4; 53:1-3; Is. 53:6; 64:6; Je. 17:9; Ro. 3:10-18, 23; 7:18; Ep. 2:3; 4:18).

Against the intellectualist, we must say that humans cannot find their way to God purely through the use of their minds. Against Pelagius,<sup>44</sup> we must say that humans cannot find their way to God purely through the exercise of their wills. Against the mystics, we must say that humans cannot find their way to God purely through the experience of their emotions and psychological moods. Human freedom is real, but it is not unlimited. Every aspect of human nature is marred by the power of sin.

### **Divine Sovereignty, Human Freedom and the Covenants of God**

It will be well to take the discussion of divine sovereignty and human freedom out of the abstract realm and examine how the two categories interact within a concrete historical setting. In the sacred history of Israel, one encounters the expression "eternal security," or at least its equivalent, in the Hebrew phrase *yekonneah al-'olam* (= he makes her secure forever) which appears with regard to Jerusalem in Psalm 48:8. This passage arises out of the covenantal promises of Israel, and it is to these promises that we shall turn. What we wish to address is the nature of God's promises and how they are carried out.

One of the primary means by which God has established and maintained relationships with the human family is through the institution of covenants, that is, sacred agreements between himself and humans. Some covenants which God established seem to be unilateral, such as, his promise to never again destroy the earth by water (Ge. 9:8-17). However, the most important covenants, especially those which extensively affected the community of faith in the OT, have a dual aspect of conditionality and unconditionality.

#### *The Covenant with Abraham*

God's covenant with Abraham is stated in apparently very unconditional language in the form of a promissory oath (Ge. 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:2-5; 17:3-22; 18:17-19; 22:15-18). Only a hint of conditionality is to be found (cf. Ge. 18:17-

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<sup>44</sup> Pelagius, a 5th century monk from the British Isles, contended that it was inherently within human power not to sin, and that when a person turned from sin he/she was able to do so under his/her own human power without a special act of God, cf. J. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971) II:27-31.

19), and that not in the original formulation.<sup>45</sup> It was reaffirmed to Isaac (Ge. 26:2-5) and later to Jacob (Ge. 28:13-15; 35:11-12). There were no particular conditions were attached to it, no commandments to obey and no obligations to fulfill. In fact, in the covenant ceremony (Ge. 15), Abraham is completely passive. A central part of this covenant was the promise of the land of Canaan which was to be granted to Abraham's descendants "forever" (Ge. 13:15; 17:8). To be sure, the fulfillment of this land grant was to be some 400 years or so into the future (Ge. 15:13-16), but the assumption was that when God had finally established his people in their promised land, they would live there perpetually (Ex. 6:2-8). The fulfillment of the promise seemed to depend only upon the sovereignty of Yahweh himself, for as he himself said, "I swore with uplifted hand... I will give it to you....I am Yahweh" (Ex. 6:8; cf. Ge. 22:15).

### *The Covenant at Sinai*

At the time when the promises of the land grant were to be fulfilled, Yahweh established another covenant with the descendants of Abraham, this one also containing stipulations about the land. There is no indication that this new covenant in any way retracted the previous one, but rather, there is every indication that the new one was a reaffirmation of the previous one. However, the new one contained a clear difference of tone, for the covenant at Sinai, unlike the Abrahamic covenant, contained a markedly conditional character. The gift of the land was now tied to the condition of the nation's fidelity to Yahweh (Dt. 6:20-25; 8:1, 18-20). The covenant contained both blessings and cursings (Dt. 11:26-32). Obedience and faithfulness would result in blessing, but disobedience and waywardness would result in the removal of the nation from the land (Dt. 28:15, 36-37, 49-52, 58-68). Yahweh declared that if the nation forsook him, he would send them "on a journey he said they should never make again" (Dt. 28:68). The land itself would be destroyed with a destruction comparable to that of Sodom and Gomorrah (Dt. 29:19-28). In the Sinai covenant, the freedom of the Israelite nation is explicit: they could choose life or death, prosperity or destruction (Dt. 30:15-20). Their choice would greatly affect how the promise of the land grant was to be fulfilled.

### *The Covenant With David*

Still later in the history of Israel, another covenant was established, this time

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<sup>45</sup> The notion of contingency in this passage arises from the infinitive *lema an* (= in order that, so that). Yahweh says of Abraham, "I have chosen him *so that* he and his posterity will obey *so that* the promise might be fulfilled, cf. W. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 207.

between Yahweh and David. This one also contained stipulations regarding the land of Palestine. Like the promissory oath to Abraham, this covenant was given in apparently unconditional language. Not only did it promise to David an unbroken dynasty, it guaranteed the land to the people Israel, undisturbed and with rest from all enemies (2 Sa. 7:8-11). The dynasty of David and the kingdom of Israel were promised eternal security (2 Sa. 7:16; cf. Ps. 18:47-50). Jerusalem was believed to be indestructible (Ps. 46:1-7; 48:4-14; 125:1-2). The security of Jerusalem seemed to depend not upon the efforts of the nation but upon the integrity of Yahweh.

### *The Tension Between the Covenants*

These conditional and unconditional aspects of Yahweh's covenants created a severe tension in the theology of ancient Israel,<sup>46</sup> a tension not unlike the one between divine sovereignty and human freedom and virtually identical to the NT tension between eternal security and falling from grace. Even with regard to the Davidic covenant, so seemingly unconditional in its formulation, one encounters a clear conditional element emerging in later times (Ps. 132:11-12). The "if" clause in the above passage is certainly different than the original formulation. When the prophets began to announce the imminent exile of the nation, their words were a tremendous theological shock (Mi. 1:6, 8-9, 12; 2:6-7; 3:11-12; Am. 2:4-16; 4:2-3; 5:18-20; 6:1-8; Je. 7:1-15).

Those Israelites who were convinced of the unconditional character of their rights to the land found it virtually impossible to accept the prophetic message that God had become Israel's enemy and would destroy her. The Davidic promise was taken to be unconditional. God guaranteed David that he would never fail to have a descendent reigning in Jerusalem (2 Sa. 7:8-16; 22:51; 23:5a). Even in times of dire threat to the security of the nation, the covenant with David would remain intact (Is. 37:35). While the northern nation of Israel rejected the Davidic covenant with its dynasty and temple (1 Kg. 12:16, 19), the southern nation of Judah clung to it tenaciously, never abandoning the dynasty of David or the central importance of Jerusalem. Mt. Zion, Yahweh's holy hill, would never be captured, even though it might be chastised (Is. 29:1-8; 31:4-5; Mic. 4:11-13; Ps. 46; 48). The popular view was that Jerusalem and the dynasty of David were guaranteed, and Yahweh's divine pleasure and blessing would continue, no matter what (Mic. 3:11; Zep. 1:12; Je. 5:12-13; 6:13-14; 8:10-11). True, Judah's enemies might make life difficult (Is. 29:1-4), but at the last minute Yahweh would defend his sacred shrine on Zion (Is. 29:5-8; 31:4-5). He would give to the Jerusalemites horns of iron and hooves of bronze with which to gore and trample their enemies (Mic. 4:11-13). The popular

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<sup>46</sup> For a complete discussion of this tension, see J. Bright, *Covenant and Promise* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).

view was that the nation was safe (Je. 7:10), and anyone who thought otherwise was to be rejected (Je. 26:10-11).

Nevertheless, the exile did occur, and as later writings indicate, it was very difficult for Israel to reconcile the seemingly unconditional character of the promises (Ps. 89:19-37) with the realities of history (Ps. 89:38-51). In spite of the unconditional promises, David's sons did fail to continuously rule over the land of Israel, a condition which Amos pictured as David's "fallen tent" (Am. 9:11) and which Jeremiah pictured as a discarded ring and a broken pot (Je. 22:24-30). In fact, Jeremiah's denunciation of the house of David is unrelenting (Je. 21:11-14; 22; 28; 36:30-31). Regardless of the eternal character of the oath to Abraham, his descendants did not possess the land forever. Even though God had promised David that the people would never again be disturbed in the land, they not only were disturbed but disturbed in the most devastating way-exile (Je. 36:30-31; 37:1-2, 6-10, 17). Zedekiah, the royal descendant of David, was forced to watch the butchery of his sons; the walls of Jerusalem were broken down; the temple was torched and the land razed (2 Ki. 25:1-11, 21b; Je. 39:1-9).

### *The Covenants and the Future*

Now it would be all too easy for someone to simply respond to Israel's theological dilemma by asserting that the promises were simply postponed until the future, and thereby the unconditional character of the covenant was inviolate. Indeed, there is a sense in which this is true, as we shall see. However, before exploring that avenue, it must first be firmly pointed out that regardless of what might happen to a future generation of Israel, the fact remains that the original formulations regarding the land grant in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants nowhere described an historical break such as the exile. To the contrary, they seem to indicate possession of the land eternally without a break. Yet it is equally true that the exile did not annul the covenantal promises of God. Rather, the exile meant that the covenantal promises would have to be fulfilled in a new way.

*Yahweh's New Work:* The tragedy of exile was not the final word of the prophets. Beyond the exile they looked to a new work of Yahweh (Is. 42:9; 43:19; 48:3-11). Some prophets described it as a new exodus, though this time it would be an exodus from exile in Mesopotamia rather than Egypt (Ho. 2:14-15; 11:11; Is. 11:16; 40:3-5; 41:17-18; 43:16-21; 48:20-21; 51:9-11; Je. 23:7-8). The ruins of Jerusalem would be redeemed, and as in the first exodus, Yahweh would protect his people before and behind (Is. 52:7-12). Those who had been rejected by God would now be accepted once more as God's people (Ho. 2:23). After the desperation of exile, Israel would once more return to her native land and follow the dynasty of David (Ho. 3:4-5; Am. 9:11-15; Is. 9:2-7; 11:1-16; 16:4b-5; Je.

23:5-6; 30:8-9; Eze. 34:22-24; 37:24-28). The covenantal promises to David were not dead (Is. 55:3; Je. 33:14-26), though they were to be fulfilled in a new way (Is. 55:8-13).

*Openness to the Future:* This reorientation of Israel's covenants to the future created an openness toward the future, an openness toward the possibility of fulfilling the ancient covenants in a new way. It is in the NT, in the story of Jesus who is the son of Abraham and David, that this openness finds its fullest expression. Paul could boldly assert that without exception all the ancient promises have their "yes" in Jesus (2 Co. 1:20). Even the customary definition of the Sons of Abraham was open to redefinition (Mt. 3:9). Even non-Jewish peoples, who were previously estranged from Israel and her covenants, could now be incorporated into the people of God through Jesus Christ (Ep. 2:11-22). Those who once were not God's people could now become God's people (Ro. 9:24-30). The promise to Abraham's offspring could be guaranteed to those who believe, regardless of their national heritage (Ro. 4:16-17; Ga. 3:26-29).

In summary, then, in the covenantal history of the Bible one can see the ideas of divine sovereignty and human freedom working themselves out. Were God's unconditional promises, which partook of the nature of a binding oath, to be understood as capable of non-fulfillment when humans failed to live up to their obligations toward God? Or was there a sense in which God's covenantal promises were absolutely sure of fulfillment regardless of the unfaithfulness of his people? The answer to this seems to be that Yahweh's promises do indeed represent decrees which he will surely bring to pass. However, due to the abuses of human freedom, he may bring them to pass in new ways not envisioned in the original formulation of the covenant. Furthermore, the personal benefit of the divine promises will only accrue to those individuals who manifest a true and living faith as demonstrated in a godly life. God will see to it that his plans are carried out in history, but he will also see to it that no one will partake of the eternal benefits of the covenant automatically.<sup>47</sup> Divine sovereignty and human freedom both contribute to the record of sacred history. Because humans are free, they are quite capable of distorting their covenantal relationship with God. Because God is sovereign, he is quite capable of reorienting his covenants toward new methods of fulfillment.

## **The Interplay of Grace and Faith in Salvation**

The two primary realities of biblical salvation are grace and faith (Ro. 4:16;

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<sup>47</sup> G. Archer, Jr., "Covenant," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 277.

5:1-2; Ep. 2:8-9). Any effort to address the subject of perseverance must do so from within the framework of grace and faith. Even in the OT covenants, grace and faith are the primary realities of God's redemptive action. Sovereign grace called Abraham from Ur and Israel from Egypt. Holy love pleaded with Israel not to forsake her covenants. Gracious longsuffering postponed historical tragedies again and again. At the deepest level, what the covenants called for from Israel was a loyal love to Yahweh and to one's neighbor far more than merely the externals of religious practice. Thus, grace and faith, while they are NT words, are also OT ideals. There is a continuity between the OT and the NT as far as grace and faith are concerned.

### Grace

The word *charis* (= grace) is Paul's favorite theological word to express how God's salvation comes, though the concept of grace is not restricted to Paul. The popular definition of grace, that is, that grace is God's unmerited favor, is certainly true. More precisely, grace is that which someone grants to another or the action of someone who volunteers to do something for another to which he/she is not bound.<sup>48</sup> Grace, then, is God's free gift; it is not earned or deserved but granted freely out of the graciousness of the giver. If in fact salvation was a matter of reward for duties performed, it could no longer be characterized as grace (Ro. 4:4; 11:6).<sup>49</sup> Grace is therefore free and not compensatory (Ro. 3:23-24).

Salvation by grace is not only evident in the writings of Paul but is woven throughout the warp and woof of the history of salvation. The call of Abraham from paganism was surely an act of grace (Jos. 24:2-4). The redemption of Israel from Egypt was not due to her greatness or to her righteousness but to Yahweh's generous love (Dt. 7:7-8; 9:4-6). God's self-revelation on Sinai was characterized by grace (Ex. 33:19). Grace came to Israel not as the culmination of the human effort to seek God, but as the bestowal of salvation by divine initiative, even when Israel was not seeking him (Is. 65:1). Similarly, in the life of Jesus the gracious acts of God are demonstrated in Jesus' acceptance of sinners (Mt. 9:9-13; 11:19). It was grace that sent the tax-collector home justified (Lk. 18:9-14), that offered absolution rather than condemnation to a sinful woman (Jn. 8:1-11), and that extended to a criminal the hope of paradise (Lk. 23:39-43).

God clearly takes the initiative in dispensing his grace. It does not depend upon human desire or effort, but upon God's mercy (Ro. 10:16). No one can even

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<sup>48</sup> BAG (1979), p. 877.

<sup>49</sup> A more literal translation of 4:4 would be: "Now to the one who works, the reward is not reckoned according to grace but according to debt" (my translation).



come to Christ except the Father draws him/her (Jn. 6:44; 16:13). Similarly, no one can truly confess Jesus as Lord except by the Holy Spirit (1 Co. 12:3). God saves men and women, not because of anything they have done, but because of his own purpose and grace (2 Ti. 1:9; Tit. 3:5). Moreover, not only is a person saved by grace, he or she is kept by grace as well. Believers are protected by the power of God (Jn. 17:11). Their salvation, which began in the grace of God, will be completed by God (Phil. 1:6; He. 12:2). They will be guarded by God's power until the end (1 Pe. 1:5; Jn. 10:28).

## **Faith**

Faith is the response by which humans receive and appropriate the salvation made available by God's gracious redemptive acts (Ro. 1:16-17; 3:22-26; 4:4-5; 5:1-2; Ga. 3:2, 23-26; Ep. 2:8; Phil. 3:8-9; 1 Pe. 1:7-9). In the NT, faith is the noun counterpart to the verb "believe."<sup>50</sup> However, it is not merely intellectual assent to a verifiable historical fact. The faith for which the NT calls is believing "in your heart" that Jesus is Lord, something deeper than intellectual assent and certainly more than is historically verifiable (Ro. 10:9). Even demons believe on some level (Ja. 2:19), but this level is surely not saving faith.

The Fourth Gospel makes clear that the faith for which Christ calls is far from superficial. The Gospel of John depicts different levels of faith in those who followed Jesus during his lifetime, and it provides valuable judgments about these levels of faith. Some who followed Jesus believed in him but were afraid to confess him publicly. The evangelist evaluates them negatively in that they loved the praise of men more than God (Jn. 12:42-43). In contrast, the faith of the man born blind, who was healed by Jesus, was the kind of faith that confessed Jesus without regard for the censure of others (Jn. 9:22, 30-38). Other followers of Jesus believed primarily because of the sensational phenomena which accompanied him, but Jesus refused to trust those who had this sort of faith (Jn. 2:23-25). These kind of "believers" were willing to eat miraculous bread and fish, but they were not willing to accept Jesus' exclusive claims about himself (Jn. 6:25-36, 41-42, 60-66). True faith rested in believing Jesus' exclusive claims, not merely believing in his works of power. True faith is believing that Jesus is Lord and God (11:25-27; 20:24-31). In fact, even those who are said to "believe" (Jn. 8:31) are shown to have inadequate faith if they rejected Jesus' claims (Jn. 8:33-59).

Thus, true faith is, in the words of Martin Luther, that which "throws itself on God."<sup>51</sup> It includes an intellectual element, but it also involves the emotional,

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<sup>50</sup> *pistis* (= faith); *pisteuo* (= to believe)

<sup>51</sup> Bloesch, 1.224.

volitional, and experiential faculties. The object of faith is not a doctrine or a set of doctrines. The object of faith is Jesus Christ. However, it is the apostolic teachings about Jesus which give faith its content, and apart from that content, faith loses its meaning.

Finally, while faith is a human response, it is a response that does not occur apart from the inward work of God in the human heart. Faith is not purely self-generated, but rather, it is the gift of God (Ro. 12:3; Ep. 2:8; Phil. 1:29; 2 Pe. 1:1). Jesus is both the author and the perfecter of faith (He. 12:2). It is sometimes assumed that salvation is only an offer by God, and that it is up to the individual in and of him/herself to lay hold of it. Such an assumption is a serious misconception (Jn. 6:44).

## **Grace, Faith, and the New Covenant**

If grace and faith are the primary realities of salvation as it is described in the NT, and if grace was also a primary element in the redemptive acts of God in the OT, how is salvation different now than before? Why was there a need for a new covenant? What is the relationship between the new and the old?

### **A New Covenant is Promised**

It has already been pointed out that there is both a conditional and an unconditional character to the OT covenants. This dual character in the covenants created a covenantal tension. The people and the kings of Israel and Judah wished to rely upon the unconditional character of the promises, especially the promises to David. For them, the unconditional character of the covenants was not a motivation toward righteousness, but a guarantee of status quo political structures and laissez faire economics; it was a divine guarantee that they could live as they wanted with impunity. The prophets sought to balance this reckless optimism by emphasizing the conditional character of the Sinai law, especially the Deuteronomic blessings and cursings. In the end, the balance in the tension swung to the conditional side when the Israelite nation lived to see the downfall of the Davidic dynasty, watched with horror the razing of the temple, and suffered exile from the land, each institution of which was expected to endure forever.

However, as we have also seen, the prophets did not see the exile as canceling out the promises of God. Rather, the exile meant that Yahweh would fulfill his promises in a new way, a way not envisioned previously by the people of Israel. This new way Jeremiah describes as a new covenant (Je. 31:31-34). It would not be like the Sinai covenant with its conditional character, the covenant which the people of Israel broke again and again. Whereas the original Sinai covenant had

been an external law enforced by the blessing or cursing of retributive justice, the new covenant would be an internalized motivation toward God's will, maintained not by retributive justice but by divine forgiveness. In this way, the new covenant swings back toward the unconditional side (Je. 31:35-37). Like the other covenants, the new covenant would be initiated through divine grace. But unlike the Sinai covenant, the new covenant would be maintained and preserved by the grace of forgiveness and by the gift of an internal desire and ability to obey God and to live as his people.

### **The New Covenant Is Established**

Paul directly alludes to Jeremiah's promise of the new covenant in the earliest literary witness to the eucharistic sayings of Jesus (1 Co. 11:25). The writers of the synoptic gospels clearly viewed the new covenant as being established in the death of Jesus Christ. Matthew stresses the idea of forgiveness (Mt. 26:28), Mark stresses the many whom the covenant will affect (Mk. 14:28), and Luke stresses the sacrificial character of the covenant (Lk. 22:20). The author of Hebrews clearly sees the new covenant as established in Jesus (He. 8:7-13). Furthermore, the promise of inheritance will be truly given inasmuch as any violations of the old covenant have been forgiven in the death of Jesus (He. 9:15; 12:24). Paul sees in the Christian gospel of grace the internalizing of the new covenant. It is not a covenant of retributive justice which kills, but it is a covenant of graciousness which gives life (2 Co. 3:1-6). The conditional character of retributive justice in the Sinai covenant has been set aside so that the promises can surely be fulfilled by the grace of God (Ga. 4:21-31).

The primary realities of the new covenant, then, are truly grace and faith. The blessings promised to David are realized in the Son of David who was raised from the dead. Jesus is the one who will never cease to sit on David's throne, because he has been resurrected from the grave never to die again (Ac. 13:32-39; 2 Ti. 2:8). The promises of blessing to Abraham and his seed are realized by everyone who comes to faith in Jesus Christ (Ro. 4:9-17). The land which was promised to Abraham is to be truly given, not merely as a geographical plot in Palestine, but as a heavenly inheritance received by faith (He. 11:8-10, 13-16, 39-40; 12:22-24).

### **Paul's Analysis of the Covenants**

In the writings of Paul, then, the unconditional character of the new covenant is clearly emphasized. Paul does not hesitate to appeal to the covenant with Abraham as the paradigm for NT salvation, because Abraham's covenant was a straightforward promise. Even though the Sinai covenant with its retributive justice came later, it could not annul the promises which God had previously made to

Abraham, promises to be established by grace and not by works (Ga. 3:15-18). The Sinai covenant with its conditional character was established as a temporary educational device until the coming of the Christ who would truly fulfil the promises (Ga. 3:19). It informed humans of the nature of sin (Ro. 7:7-13), it demonstrated that the whole world was under the bondage of sin and incapable of measuring up to the demands of the law (Ga. 3:21-23), and it taught men and women of their need for the grace that is in Christ Jesus (Ga. 3:24-29).<sup>52</sup>

The Sinai covenant was good insofar as it accomplished these purposes (Ro. 7:12). However, the Sinai covenant was not capable of keeping a person in a right relationship with Yahweh because it was primarily an instrument of wrath toward human failure (Ro. 4:15). It could tell people when they were wrong, but it could not enable them to live righteously. It was powerless before the depravity of human nature (Ro. 8:3). A right standing with God could only come by an acquittal--a full pardon for transgressions--and this acquittal comes only by faith in Jesus Christ (Ga. 2:15-16). To even attempt to establish a right standing before God under the Sinai pattern is to set aside the grace of God (Ga. 2:21).

### **The Unconditional Character of the New Covenant**

In summary, then, it should be seen that while the Sinai covenant with its retributive justice comes to dominate the theology of the OT prophets, and so swings the balance toward the conditional side, the new covenant with its emphasis on forgiveness, grace and faith swings the balance back toward the unconditional side. The unconditional promises to Abraham and David are guaranteed in the new covenant to those who have faith in Jesus Christ (Ro. 4:1-8, 16, 22-25; Ga. 3:6-14, 26-29; Ac. 15:13-18).

### **The Unpardonable Sin**

Inasmuch as the tension between the conditional and unconditional character of God's covenants swings toward the unconditional side in the new covenant, it is appropriate to address the sin which Jesus said cannot be forgiven. If salvation is by grace through faith, both of which are the gift of God, and if the new covenant is indeed unconditional in character, then how can there be an unpardonable sin? The fact that there is such a sin implies, by its very nature, that all other sins are forgivable, but not this one. Can such a sin be committed by a believer or does it

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<sup>52</sup> The phrase in Ga. 3:24 rendered "put in charge" is from the Greek term *paidagogos*, a word referring to a slave-custodian or truant officer, that is, the slave who was responsible to see that the master's child made it to school and back safely, cf. G. Bertram, *TDNT* (1967) V.620. Such slaves were often rude, rough and qualified for nothing better, cf. H. Betz, *Galatians [Hermeneia]* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p. 177.

apply only to unbelievers? What about Judas Iscariot? He was chosen by Jesus but later betrayed him.

### **The Eternal Sin**

In the synoptic gospels, in a situation in which Jesus was facing heavy criticism over his powers of exorcism, our Lord gives a pronouncement that every human blasphemy will be forgiven except one--the slander against the Holy Spirit. Such slander is an eternal sin (Mk. 3:28-29; Mt. 12:31-32; Lk. 12:10). A precise definition of the slander against the Holy Spirit is not given. In the context of the story, those who are warned about it had been attributing the gracious healing power of Jesus to the forces of evil.<sup>53</sup>

In 1 John 5:16-17 there is mentioned a “sin unto death,” a sin so serious that it is inappropriate to even pray for it. Once again, no precise definition is given. The writer of Hebrews describes an apostasy that is irremediable due to a stubborn stance of rejecting the Christian faith (He. 6:4-6). Paul writes of Christians who had died because of their abuse of the Lord’s Table (1 Co. 11:29-30). Ananias and Sapphira were executed by God for lying to the Holy Spirit (Ac. 5:4-5, 9-10). Do these passages relate, and if so, how? Are they referring to the same thing or different things?

We may not be able to answer these questions with finality. In the case of the divine executions, these deaths may be viewed as a judgment in time though not necessarily a damnation for eternity. However, in the case of the apostasy mentioned in Hebrews 6, the nature of the passage strongly suggests that the apostasy should be interpreted as a stance of aggressive non-faith, very similar if not identical to the situation of the unpardonable sin in the synoptic gospels.<sup>54</sup> Though a more precise definition is not given, some observations can be made about this unpardonable sin:

- ♦ It does not appear that the eternal sin is accidental. It is not something one stumbles into, but rather, something which is quite deliberate and probably premeditated.

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<sup>53</sup> The etymological roots of the name Beelzebub are uncertain, and several interpretations are offered by scholars. Nevertheless, whether a Baal deity, the Lord of Defecation, the Lord of the Shrine (Yahweh’s rival) or simply the Evil One, it remains that such an accusation against Jesus was the epitome of slander, cf. T. Gaster, *IDB* (1962) I 374.

<sup>54</sup> While interpreters may disagree on whether the situation in Hebrews describes true Christians who apostatize or merely apparent Christians who apostatize, they generally agree that the passage describes an irremediable state, that is, a stance against God and Christ from which a person will not turn. Some have attempted to treat this apostasy as only hypothetical, that is, as a situation which could not really happen, but as one scholar says, if it is merely hypothetical it is not a warning about anything, cf. L. Morris, “Hebrews”, *EBC* (1981) 12.56.

- ♦ It is not merely doubt or even unbelief. Examples of those who doubted Jesus but who later came to faith in him, such as Nathanael, are not wanting in the gospels. To say that good is evil is surely far more serious than unbelief. To “crucify the Son of God all over again and subject him to public disgrace” cannot be passed off as mere doubt. In fact, Jesus says that it is even forgivable for persons to speak against him as long as one does not slander the Holy Spirit.

The eternal sin may be committed by those outside the Christian community altogether, as implied by Jesus’ warning to the Jewish leaders, or it may be committed by those who have formerly associated themselves with the Christian community, as suggested in Hebrews. The interpretation in the post-apostolic church was that the eternal sin was only committed by believers who apostatized,<sup>55</sup> but this restriction is unnecessary.

It would seem, then, that the eternal sin must have something to do with the antagonistic motive underlying the slander and unbelief more than just the slander and unbelief itself. Something as final as the eternal sin must be more than just a matter of words or lack of understanding. Rather, it must be akin to the individual who forever closed his or her mind to the gracious action of God, a stance of unyielding and even antagonistic non-faith. If so, then the eternal sin would be more of a state or a condition than simply an act. It would be more internal than external. It would not be so much an arbitrary judgment by God against humans as it would be the conscious attitude of an individual who sets herself or himself in an intentional opposition against God. The conclusion that such an attitude is an eternal offense naturally follows, for one can hardly be forgiven by God if he or she adamantly refuses all recognition of God.

### **Judas Iscariot**

The treachery of Judas Iscariot bears special attention in this discussion. He was numbered with the Twelve Apostles (Mt. 10:4). He apparently was given powers of exorcism and healing (Mt. 10:8), and if he was part of the company of the 70 evangelists, he may very well have exercised those powers (Lk. 10:1, 17). Luke 10:20 seems to imply that Judas’ name was written in heaven, unless this statement is taken to be a generalism. Peter frankly confessed about Judas, “He was one of our number and shared in this ministry” (Ac. 1:17). All the apostles agreed that Judas left the apostolic ministry to go where he belonged (Ac. 1:25).

At the same time, Jesus apparently knew the destiny of Judas from the

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<sup>55</sup> J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985) II.964.

beginning (Jn. 6:64, 70-71; 13:10-11; 17:12; Mt. 26:21, 23-25). Still he called him, and we surely must treat this call as sincere. Jesus' final greeting to Judas as a friend betrays no personal animosity (Mt. 26:50).

So, then, how is one to assess Judas Iscariot? Was he ever a believer or was he merely a pseudo-believer who followed Jesus for reasons other than the right ones? The answer is unclear, though the latter position seems more probable given the various details of his life. In any case, his sin of aggressive non-faith in betraying the Son of God certainly puts him in the category of one who committed the unpardonable sin. He is rightly called the "son of damnation" (Jn. 17:12).

## **A Final Assessment**

This study began with the difficult and controversial question of whether or not it is possible for a true Christian to apostatize. A wide range of factors influence such a question, and the more significant of them have been examined in turn. We have discovered that:

1. There are many passages which can be marshalled to support both sides of the issue.
2. The issue is greatly affected by one's view of divine sovereignty and human freedom.
3. The promise of eternal security was first made in the OT with regard to the land promises given to Israel in Yahweh's covenants with Abraham and David.
4. In spite of the promise of eternal security, the conditional nature of the Sinai covenant shattered the expectations of Israel in the exile.
5. The hope of a new covenant, different than the retributive justice of the Sinai covenant, was held forth as a new work by Yahweh.
6. In the death of Jesus Christ, the new covenant was established, making the elements of grace, faith and forgiveness the primary emphases of salvation in the NT.
7. Even though grace and forgiveness are NT realities, it is still possible for a person to reject God so thoroughly that his/her condition is irremediable.

The original question of eternal security versus falling from grace can now be viewed in a somewhat broader framework. As a final assessment of the question, consider the following:

## Turning Back

However one answers the above question, it cannot be denied that some persons began following Jesus, at least in some sense, only to turn back and follow him no more. Such rejection occurred among Jesus' followers during his lifetime on more than one occasion (Jn. 6:66; 8:31, 48, 52, 59). Even one of the Twelve betrayed him.<sup>56</sup>

Jesus himself suggested that such an action could occur in the parable of the sower (Mt. 13:20-22) and in the metaphor of the vine (Jn. 15:6). Paul also describes the same kind of defection (1 Ti. 1:19-20; 4:1) as do other NT writers (Jude 4, 12-13, 19; 2 Pe. 3:17-18). The real question, then, is not whether some folks begin to follow Jesus and then turn back. The real question is whether they had real faith or pseudo-faith.

Paul seems especially concerned that the people in his congregations do not give up their faith. While he seems to have been certain of the election of the Thessalonians (1 Th. 1:4), he nevertheless showed concern that they might have succumbed to temptation and might have defected in their faith (1 Th. 3:5), a defection that would have rendered his evangelistic work useless and robbed him of his reward at the great judgment (1 Th. 2:19).<sup>57</sup> This same concern is shown for the Corinthians (2 Co. 11:2-4).

Similarly, Paul shows deep agitation at the Galatians who have begun to succumb to the false gospel of the Judaizers. If the Galatians have become bewitched by a false message (Ga. 3:1), Paul fears that his evangelistic efforts would have been wasted (Ga. 4:8-11). If they would revert back to circumcision, Christ would no longer be of any value, and they would be severed from Christ and fallen from grace (Ga. 5:2, 4). To the Corinthians Paul gives the challenge of self-examination so as to determine whether or not they would "fail the test" (2 Co. 13:5-6). To the Colossians, Paul writes that the proof of their reconciliation to God was to be found in their enduring fidelity to the gospel (Col. 1:23).

## Psychological Assurance

If one wishes to answer the question purely from the point of gaining a psychological assurance of salvation, he/she will be disappointed. Either way the question is answered, psychological assurance is not guaranteed. If one believes in

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<sup>56</sup> It is not without significance that Judas is consistently referred to as "one of the Twelve," almost as if the evangelists could hardly reconcile the reality of his being chosen for service and yet betraying his master also (Mt. 26:14, 47; Mk. 14:10, 20, 43; Lk. 22:3, 47; Jn. 6:70-71).

<sup>57</sup> I. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians [NCB]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 93.



eternal security, it must still be pointed out that there have been persons who have turned back from following Christ and who, though at one time they considered themselves to have had true faith, yet later demonstrate that they do not. Thus, a theological position of eternal security does not automatically bring with it a psychological assurance of salvation. In fact, it is quite possible to live in terror so that even though persons are attempting to serve God, they might in the end discover to their horror that their apparent Christian life was only a matter of self-initiative and not true faith. On the other hand, those who believe in the possibility of falling from grace, because of the very nature of their theological position, cannot rule out the possibility that they themselves might turn from God. The irony is that sometimes they are more psychologically secure than those who accept the doctrine of eternal security.

### **The Promises of Security**

Without question, the new covenant with its character of forgiveness, provides the framework in which NT salvation is to be viewed. Even if it was conceded that a person could truly turn from true faith to a position of aggressive non-faith, still one must never confuse aggressive non-faith with merely human weakness, as bad as it is. Even the Corinthians, who probably demonstrated more human weakness than any other Christians in the NT, were regarded as those “sanctified in Jesus Christ” (1 Co. 1:2). Even though the Corinthian Christian who was guilty of incest was to be expelled from the protection of the church, the inevitable destruction of his body by the attacks of Satan was only a disciplinary judgment so that his spirit could be saved in the end (1 Co. 5:4-5). Even the deaths of the Corinthians who so severely abused the Lord’s table were to be viewed as a divine discipline so that they “would not be condemned with the world” (1 Co. 11:30-32). Christians might lose their rewards, but they would be saved nonetheless (1 Co. 3:14-15). Thus, Paul’s great affirmation that Christ died and stands at the right hand of God interceding for the saints against all accusations becomes a triumphant promise of perseverance, not due to human abilities but due to the power and grace of God (Ro. 8:31-34).

### **The Warnings Against Defection**

The promises of assurance notwithstanding, the NT warnings against defection cannot be passed over. They are present just as frequently as are the guarantees. Some have attempted to understand such warnings as merely hypothetical, but hypothetical warnings seem either pointless or deceptive if they are not directed toward a real possibility. It is not unlikely that the seemingly dual stance of the NT authors arises out of pastoral concern. Converts to Christianity needed assurance that they would be preserved by God’s power, and such

assurance was confidently given. However, pastoral experience also suggested that some of those who had once claimed the faith had defected, and warnings against such defection were in order. The paradoxical character of these two kinds of pastoral advice did not seem to trouble the writers of the NT. They do not seem to have asked the questions that Christians have posed since their time. Because of their dual stance, arguments for both eternal security and falling from grace can be marshaled.

### **The Question in Christian History**

In the earliest period of Christian history, apostasy was considered to be a real possibility. In the post-apostolic writings of the Shepherd of Hermas and Tertullian, postbaptismal repentance was allowed only once. For Cyprian and others, it was not allowed at all. Apostasy, murder and fornication were often viewed as unpardonable sins.<sup>58</sup> In the great persecutions under the Emperor Decius, many Christians succumbed to saying “Caesar is Lord” under torture.<sup>59</sup> Such apostates were expelled from the church, and it was believed that outside the church there was no salvation.

With Augustine, the theme of absolute and infallible perseverance was asserted, that is, the doctrine that without exception all those elected to salvation are irresistibly preserved to the end without falling. It should be noted that Augustine’s theology arose as a counter-measure against Pelagius, the British monk who denied that Adam’s sin affected the human race and who taught that humans have power in themselves to live in perfection. With John Calvin, the doctrine was extended to its logical conclusion that Christ’s atoning death was only for those whom God had chosen, and those so chosen were individually predestined to glory. While they might sin, they could never totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace.<sup>60</sup> Those who apparently have Christian faith but fall away never truly had faith in the first place. The followers of Calvin, of course, were opposed by the disciples of Jacob Arminius in the Remonstrance of 1610. The Calvinists responded with their own five points in 1618. Since that time, the debate between so-called Calvinism and Arminianism has been shaped by five opposing points of view:

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<sup>58</sup> R. White, “Perseverance,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), pp. 844-845.

<sup>59</sup> B. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), pp. 90-91.

<sup>60</sup> White, pp. 844-845.

**Arminianism**

1. Total Freedom (faith equals the sinners gift to God)
2. Conditional Election (God chooses out of his foreknowledge)
3. Universal Atonement (Christ died for all)
4. The Holy Spirit can be resisted (sinners can say “no”)
5. Falling from Grace (Christians can apostatize and be lost)

**Calvinism**

1. Total Depravity or inability (faith equals God’s gift to the sinner)
2. Unconditional Election (God chooses out of pure sovereignty)
3. Limited Atonement (Christ died for the elect only)
4. Irresistible Grace (God’s call will always be effective)
5. Perseverance (all those chosen by God shall surely persevere; they are eternally secure)

Martin Luther, on the other hand, maintained that a believer could fall from grace into condemnation. It was not that the believer did not have security, for “faith is.... so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times.” However, the certainty of faith rested not in itself but in its object, Jesus Christ. Believers are secure so long as they continue to believe, but such faith must be renewed daily. No worldly nor spiritual force may pluck them from God’s hand, but if they go back on faith itself, they have renounced their only lifeline to God.<sup>61</sup>

Against Calvin, John Wesley maintained that the Christian could be sure of present salvation but not final salvation, that is, that falling from grace into condemnation was possible. At the same time, he asserted that some Christians might be given the assurance of hope or the “full assurance of faith” that they would indeed be kept secure until the end.<sup>62</sup> Thus, though there are some who would say that one must believe in eternal security to be true to the Reformation tradition, such is not historically accurate. Since that time there have been two streams of American Protestantism, one with its roots in Calvinism (such as, the Baptists, Reformed Churches, Presbyterians) and the other with its roots in Arminian Methodism (such as, the Wesleyan Methodists, the Nazarenes, the Pentecostals).

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<sup>61</sup> D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 236, 240.

<sup>62</sup> Bloesch, p. 238.

## Two Extremes

The modern polarization over the question has sometimes resulted in two extremes, both of which seem unwarranted in light of the NT:

### *Precarious Christian Living*

Those who maintain that a believer can fall from grace too often lapse into the trap of legalism, that is, the erroneous position that they can somehow persevere through their own dedication, commitment and personal holiness. Often enough, such persons establish codes of conduct which flatly deny the freedom of the believer in Christ. They introduce a conscience legislated from either individual leaders or from the corporate community, and they compel Christians to live in fear. Such pressure is spiritual tyranny, and it is to be abhorred as sub-Christian.

### *Careless Christian Living*

Those who maintain that a believer is eternally secure sometimes lapse into a state of indifference toward sin. Because they are guaranteed eternal life no matter what, they become nonchalant regarding the seriousness of worldliness. At worst, all they might lose is their heavenly reward, not their salvation, and since no one knows for sure exactly what such rewards will be, the loss is not keenly felt. This lifestyle is also to be abhorred.

As a final word, it will become apparent by this time that the question will not be resolved here. The evidence of the NT is paradoxical to say the least. Perhaps this is not all bad. Perhaps the very paradox will on the one hand call believers toward a deeper life of discipleship and on the other hand will prevent them from a life of uncertainty. We may all agree with the comforting words:

“He did not begin to love me because of what I was, and he will go on loving me in spite of what I am.”

If we fall, we know that it is our fault; if we persevere, we know that it is due to God’s grace and power. The warnings of the NT call us toward deeper devotion to Christ; yet “if it depended upon us, our waywardness would long ago have snatched us out of God’s hands and separated us from God’s love.”<sup>63</sup> So with the great apostle, we walk by faith, not by sight. Though outwardly we are perishing, yet inwardly we are being renewed daily. We have this treasure in jars of clay to

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<sup>63</sup> White, p. 845.

show that the all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. Because of this, we do not lose heart (2 Co. 5:7; 4:7-18)!

## **The Unity of the New Testament**

To Christians, the NT is the second and shorter division of the Holy Scriptures, called “God’s Written Word.” It comprises all the foundational documents and primary sources of the Christian faith, inspired by God, written by about ten men, and vouched for by the Holy Spirit. These documents were completed within a century of the time of Jesus, and some of the most important of them, within a generation of the time of Jesus. The various authors did not write as collaborators with each other, though in certain cases there is evidence of literary dependency between certain documents (i.e., between the synoptic gospels and between Jude and 2 Peter).

Not until the beginning of the second century was an effort made toward gathering the various documents into a single collection, and it was not until the latter part of the fourth century that all twenty-seven books, as we now have them, were listed together as forming a single body which was neither to be expanded nor reduced, but was agreed upon as the canon (= standard, norm) of the NT.

The NT is a study in literary variety. The first four books, called gospels, resemble biographies in some ways, but they clearly do not closely fit the modern definition of a biography. (No modern biographer would virtually ignore the first thirty years of his subject’s life, spend most of his time on only a three year section, and almost a third of the entire work on the final week of his subject’s life!) The gospels are followed by a long narrative history, largely concerned with the exploits of two important apostles, Peter and Paul. Then come twenty-one letters from several Christian leaders, ranging from broad theological treatises (like Romans) to intensely personal letters about specific life situations (like Philemon). Finally, the NT closes with the Apocalypse, a book written in a highly stylized literary technique developed by the Jews in the intertestamental period, a style both cryptic and fascinating.

To the outsider, this tremendous variety may seem to be a hodgepodge, but to the careful reader of the NT there emerges from among this variety a striking unity. In fact, so striking is this unity that the Christian can say, without a moment’s hesitation, that there is only a single message in the NT. While the diversity of the documents cannot be denied, the single message of the whole is what gives to the NT its distinctive unity. The following study examines this central message and unity of the NT through its use of theologically significant words.

## **The *Kerygma* (the proclamation)**

The message of the NT is more than a story or a speculation. It is an announcement, a proclamation of an event of such universal significance that it cannot be set aside or ignored. The NT term *kerygma* (preaching, proclamation), what Paul calls the “*kerygma* of Jesus Christ” (Ro. 16:25), is the announcement that God has taken decisive action in human history. This divine action was so consequential that the one who truly believes the *kerygma* will be saved, that is, he/she will be rescued from the despair of guilt and punishment and will be reconciled to God. The essence of the NT *kerygma* consists of the following central claims:

- 1) The prophecies of the OT have been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth;
- 2) The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are divine actions by which God intends to reclaim a prodigal world;
- 3) The miracle of Jesus’ resurrection is historically reliable in that it has been attested by eyewitnesses especially chosen by God; and
- 4) Jesus has been exalted as Messiah and Lord over all the universe.<sup>64</sup>

## ***Euangelion* (the good news)**

Our word “gospel” is a simplified form of the Old English term “godspel,” which meant “good story.” Like the NT word -, the message of Jesus is indeed “good news.” This idea of gospel or good news begins as an OT proclamation to the Jewish exiles in Babylon to whom was announced the “good news” of liberation and restoration (Is. 40:9-11). The OT good news to Israel became a prophetic oracle pointing, not only to the physical restoration of a single nation, but to the spiritual restoration of all nations. The message of God’s reign, which was first given to Israel in her terrible time of national despair (Is. 52:7), became an international proclamation through Jesus (Ro. 10:12-15).

The proclamation of the reign of God (= kingdom of God), that is, the fact that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth God’s reconciling rule over all things was inaugurated, is at the heart of the message of the NT (Mk. 1:1, 14-15). Those who submit to God’s reign might do so at great personal cost, but in the end, they are promised eternal life (Mk. 10:28-30). The good news, which began in Galilee, was destined to be proclaimed throughout the world (Mk. 13:10; 14:9; 16:15//Mt.

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<sup>64</sup> While these central claims are everywhere evident in the NT, the four extensively reported sermons in the Book of Acts are a very instructive place to begin to appreciate these elements of the early church’s proclamation (cf. Ac. 2:14-36; 3:13-26; 10:34-43; 13:16-41).

28:19).

### ***Logos* (the incarnate Word)**

When John began the Fourth Gospel with the now well-known phrase, “In the beginning was the *Logos*,” he brought together at least two important ideas. First, the opening clause “in the beginning” recalls the opening words of the OT (Ge. 1:1) in which the account of the creation of the universe was punctuated at each stage by the affirmation, “And God said...” (Ge. 1:3, 6, 9, etc.). John described the divine voice as more than just an utterance. He personalized this divine word so that the voice of God was not merely some “thing” but some “one” – someone who was “with God” and who “was God” (Jn. 1:1-2). This divine *Logos*, this “someone” who was with God in the beginning and who participated in the divine nature, was the agent by whom God created the universe (Jn. 1:3).

Second, the word *logos* was a current term in Greek philosophy which denoted the cosmic principle of rationality which imposed order on the raw material of the universe. As such, when the Christian message began to reach out into the Greco-Roman world, the term *Logos*, as a description of Jesus, became a bridge-term which assisted the pagan world in understanding that Jesus was the author and maintainer of the cosmos.

This divine *Logos*, this personal agent who was with God in the beginning, who was himself God, and who created and maintained the universe, became a human being and lived an earthly life (Jn. 1:10, 14). John describes him as God’s “one and only Son” and as “God the Son” (Jn. 1:14, 18; cf. 1 Jn. 1:1-3).

### ***Skandalon* (the offense of the cross)**

Jesus of Nazareth polarized his audiences. Those who heard him teach were rarely neutral but aligned themselves either for or against him. It is in this sense that the NT speaks of the message of Jesus as being a *skandalon* (= offense, trap). To the Jews, Jesus was a stone which caused them to spiritually stumble (Ro. 9:32-33; 11:9; 1 Co. 1:23), because they had difficulty in seeing how the same man could be both the anointed of God (messiah) and the cursed of God (hung on a tree, cf. Dt. 21:23) at the same time. To all people the message of the cross was an offense, because it declared that they were sinners who were powerless to rectify their situation. Even religious activities could not, in themselves, bring men and women closer to God (Ga. 5:11). Rather, Jesus the Messiah became a substitutionary curse for all people (Ga. 3:13). He bore the curse of God due to them upon himself, and when he died, he died as a criminal, though in reality he was innocent. Thus, there is no room for boasting (Ro. 3:27; Ga. 6:14). We did nothing; Christ did everything and this message offends our human pride.

### ***Kyrios Christos* (Jesus as Lord and Messiah)**

The two titles “Messiah” and “Lord” are frequently appended to the name Jesus in the NT (Ac. 11:17; 15:26; Ro. 1:7; 1 Co. 1:3, etc.). Each bears important connotations. The term Messiah (= the anointed; Gk. = *Christos*; Hb. *mashiach*) is an OT designation for one who was chosen by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to do a special work for God, particularly a work of deliverance. Popular Jewish thought held that a Messiah *par excellence* would come and liberate them from the political bondage of Rome. Jesus of Nazareth, while he accepted the term Messiah (Mt. 16:13-20), did not follow the popular agenda. Instead, his role as a deliverer was the role of one who would rescue men and women from sin, guilt, and the powers of evil (Mk. 14:61-62). When the apostles proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, it is in a spiritual sense that they speak (Ac. 2:36-41).

The second title “Lord” carries meaning from both the OT as well as the Greco-Roman world. In the OT, the term *Kyrios* was the common Greek translation of the name Yahweh, the sacred name of God. In the Greco-Roman world, the term *Kyrios* was used to refer to superiors, particularly state officials who held absolute power and even deities.

Thus, when the earliest Christians proclaimed the basic confession, “Jesus is Lord” (Ro. 10:9; 1 Co. 8:6; 12:3), they were at once identifying Jesus with God in the OT as well as the highest authority in the universe. As *Kyrios Christos*, Jesus was the enthroned messiah, raised by the Father and ascended into the heavens at the Father’s right hand.

### ***Soteria, Charis and Pistis* (salvation by grace through faith)**

The term *soteria* (= salvation) is the most general term in the NT for deliverance from sin, despair, and judgment. The climax of salvation will be at the end of the age when the people of God will be exempt from condemnation for their sins at the great judgment. Instead of punishment, they will be rewarded and commended for their faith in Jesus Christ.

The active means by which salvation becomes effective for women and men is like a two-sided coin. One side is *charis* (= grace), that is, the undeserved action which God takes to rectify humanity’s alienation from himself. Humans are incapable of restoring themselves, but God in his grace takes the initiative to put them right again (Ac. 15:11; Ro. 3:23-24). The other side is *pistis* (=faith), that is, the response which men and women make by believing and accepting the good news of salvation in Jesus (Ac. 16:31; Ro. 5:1; Ga. 3:26). Salvation, then, is made effective by grace through faith (Ro. 4:16; Ep. 2:8).



### ***Ethnoi* (God’s promise to the nations)**

The proclamation of the good news about salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ is intended to be a universal message to the *ethnoi* ( the nations). While the bulk of the OT is primarily concerned with one nation, the divine promise to even that one nation had a universal purpose (Ge. 12:1-3). The fulfillment of that universal perspective was finally realized in the NT. The message of salvation which was accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus was given to the apostles for them to spread among the nations of the world (Lk. 24:45-48). Paul, in particular, spearheaded the preaching of the good news to non-Jewish peoples (Ac. 26:15-23; Ro. 15:20-21; Ga. 2:7-9).

### ***Maranatha* (come, O Lord)**

*Maranatha* (= O Lord, come) was an Aramaic prayer of the earliest Christians (cf. 1 Co. 16:22). It captured the Christian expectancy of the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to return to the earth to finalize the salvation of his people (Jn. 14:1-3; Ac. 1:11; 1 Th. 4:15-18; He. 9:27-28; Re. 1:7).

### **The *Ekklesia* (the congregation)**

The unity of the NT lies not only in certain beliefs about Jesus of Nazareth and his mission but also in the community and brotherhood of believers who have come to faith in him as Lord and Christ. The early Christians used the term *ekklesia* ( congregation, church) to express this notion of community. A Savior and a message of salvation necessarily implied a saved people. The roots of this idea go back into the OT where the Israelites, as the people of God, were God’s holy community. In the NT, there is the claim that a new people of God is being formed, a community created through Jesus Christ made up of all nationalities (Mt. 16:18; Ac. 15:14; Ep. 2:11-22; 1 Pe. 2:9-10).

Most of the references to *ekklesia* in the NT refer to local congregations in specific cities of the Greco-Roman world. There was a congregation in Jerusalem (Ac. 8:1), one in Corinth (2 Co. 1:1), one in Thessalonica (2 Th. 1:1), and a group of congregations in the province of Galatia (Ga. 1:2). However, on occasion the term *ekklesia* was used in a broader sense to refer to the body of believers throughout the world, the entire “church of God” (1 Co. 10:32; 12:28; Ga. 1:13; Ep. 1:22-23; 3:20-21).

### ***Mathetai* (the disciples of the Lord)**

The term *mathetes* (= learner, pupil, disciple), which refers to someone who binds himself/herself to someone else in order to acquire knowledge, was used in both the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds. Among Jews, it was usually used to

refer to one who was in the process of learning Jewish theology and tradition from a rabbi. Among the Greeks and Romans, a disciple was often an apprentice to a tradesman, a student of medicine, or a member of a philosophical school. The followers of John the Baptist, and later the followers of Jesus, were called *mathetai* (Mk. 4:34; 6:1; 9:30-31a; Lk. 14:26-33; Jn. 13:34-35; 15:8). This meant that they had committed themselves to learning from Jesus and to following his example. While Jesus followers were privileged to learn from him personally during his earthly life, the term continued to be used of the believers even after Jesus ascended up into heaven (Ac. 6:1, 7; 9:1, 26). Eventually the term “Christian” (a Latin form - adherents to Christ) became more popular than the term *mathetes* (Ac. 11:26), but the role of a believer must always be understood as the commitment of a man or a woman to follow Jesus and to learn from his teachings.

A special group of men must be distinguished from the larger group of disciples. These men, called the Twelve Apostles, were selected by Jesus out from among the larger group (Mt. 10:2-4). In a symbolic way, the number “twelve” is significant since it recalls the old community of Israel who descended from the twelve sons of Jacob. The twelve apostles, then, represented the nucleus of a new community of faith. Beyond their symbolic significance, these men were called upon to serve as eyewitnesses of the earthly life, death and resurrection of Jesus (Ac. 10:39-42), and their number was so sacrosanct that when one of them defected, a replacement was solemnly chosen (Ac. 1:21-26). As primitive Christian leaders, the apostles became the foundation stones for the new community of faith (1 Co. 12:28; Ep. 2:20).

### ***Didache* (the teachings)**

Since the believers in Jesus were also learners of his teachings and followers of his life, an authoritative body of teachings developed which became the “textbook” of the disciples. This body of teachings was originally safeguarded by the apostles, men who had known Jesus personally and who had been especially chosen by him to bear witness to his life and teachings. At first, this body of teachings was transmitted orally, originally from Jesus to the Twelve and later from the Twelve to other believers (Ac. 2:42). Eventually, the teachings were written down in the documents of the NT as Scriptures. It is a fundamental axiom that the authority of the NT is grounded upon the belief that its writings were either penned by an apostle or its teachings approved by the apostles.<sup>65</sup> While everything

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<sup>65</sup> Only the NT books of Matthew, John, 1 and 2 Peter, and 1, 2 and 3 John carry names from the original Twelve. The others, however, were approved by the apostolic church as carrying the authority of the apostles in one way or another. For instance, Mark’s gospel is believed to be based on the witness of Peter. Paul’s authority as the leader of the gentile mission came directly from Jesus Christ by revelation and was affirmed by the other apostles (Ga. 1:11-12; 2:7-9).

that the apostles taught and wrote was not fully given by Jesus in his earthly life, he promised to give to the apostles a full understanding through the Holy Spirit whom he would send to them after he ascended into the heavens (Jn. 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15).

From the apostles, the *didache* of Christ continues to be passed down in the teaching ministry of the church (1 Co. 15:1-4; 2 Ti. 3:16). This *didache*, and this *didache* alone, holds authority for the faith and practice of the church (2 Ti. 1:13-14; 2 Jn. 9-10).

### ***Koinonia* (the sharing)**

Because the disciples of Jesus were bound together in an *ekklesia*, a community of faith, they were necessarily involved in sharing with each other. The notion of *koinonia* (= sharing, communion, fellowship) was highly significant for the earliest Christians, and they met together regularly for teaching and worship (Ac. 2:42, 46-47). A central act of their worship was the celebration of eucharist (= thanksgiving), and the sharing of the bread and wine, patterned after Jesus' last supper with the Twelve, was called *koinonia* (1 Co. 10:16-17). *Koinonia* not only applied to their worship, it applied to their preaching mission (Phil. 1:4-5; Phlm 6), to their concern for the physical welfare of each other (2 Co. 8:1-5; Ga. 6:6; He. 13:16), and to their sense of union with Christ (2 Co. 13:14; Phil. 3:10; 1 Jn. 1:3). Fellowship with one another in the church is the norm for Christians (1 Jn. 1:7), and to those who neglect this aspect of Christian discipleship, the NT counsels them to rejoin the assemblies (He. 10:25).

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