

Chapter 22
Christian Faith in the Empire of Rome
Theologies of the Synoptic Gospels

The next explicit theologies to be developed were those of the synoptic Gospels, and it is helpful to define the three key terms.

"Gospel" is a word with which every Christian is familiar, yet few have probed deeply into its denotative meaning. The Greek word on which the English translation is based is related to the word "angel." In the Greek world the angel was one who brought a message; an "angellion," the word from which Gospel is translated, meant at first the reward paid to the bringer of good news and soon came to mean the good news itself. So, in Greek, the "angellion" was the good news and in the Christian sense meant the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The word itself is derived from the old English phrase "Godspel" - "God spiel" or God speaking the gospel is the word God speaks to human beings in and through Jesus Christ, and what occurred in Christ is good news indeed.

"Synoptic," the second of the words needing definition, also has a Greek background. "Optic" has to do with seeing, an act of the eyes, and "syn" means "together." Synoptic means, therefore, something seen together. When it is used to refer to the Gospels it means those three Gospels that have to be seen together to be best understood: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. When they are examined with care, it is clear that they are related to one another. They do not tell precisely that same story but the story they do tell is similar enough that one Gospel seems to be built upon another. So, to distinguish them from the Gospel of John which is different in form, scholars refer to these three as "the synoptic Gospels," and the term refers to the inner relationships they have to each other.

The use of the plural form "theologies" rather than the singular needs to be justified also. Theology is our reasoned and reasonable attempt to understand what God is doing in human life and the fact that the theologies are plural means that each has its own point of view to express; in these Gospels we receive three differing perspectives of the activity of God in Christ. No one person, no one book is able to present all we need to know about Christ; those who later compiled the New Testament were wise to bring together the testimonies of a variety of witnesses to him so that Christians who came after them would be able to see him in the fullness of his being.

I.

The first of the theologies was that of the Gospel according to Mark. As nearly as we can tell, this Gospel was written in response to the persecution of Christian people that broke out in Rome about July 19, A.D. 63. On this day the Emperor Nero caused the city of Rome to be burned and then blamed the Christians for doing it.

This precipitated a crisis among the Christians. The persecution touched leadership and membership alike; all were liable to punishment and many died. Tradition has it that Simon Peter was one of these; if true, the closest historical link to Jesus had been removed from the church. Paul's death had preceded Peter's by only a short while and few of the founders of the church's faith were left to offer comfort and guidance to the remaining Christian people. How could the Roman church face its desperate situation with its dependable leadership scattered, dead, or in hiding?

Its answer was to gather together the material about Jesus available to them and put it into a meaningful form. The material, some of which has been used in the worship, educational, and evangelistic ventures of the church, included accounts of his crucifixion and death, his resurrection, his mighty works, his controversies and his teaching. The form in which they chose to put it was a written Gospel. A Gospel is not a biography of Jesus; it omits many things we would like to know about him. It was instead a narrative that told the good news of what God had done in Christ. So far as I know, this was a completely new form of literature; there were no Gospels as such before the time of Christ, no connected narrative about the gods or heroes of Rome and Greece that were constructed to tell the good news about them. Many amazing things happened during the early days of the Christian movement, but the writing of Gospels is one of the most remarkable of all. The activity of God in Christ called forth a unique kind of writing, a Gospel; and when a small number had been produced, they proved to be all that were needed to transmit the message of Christ into all the world. Mark wrote his first, and Matthew, Luke, and John followed in short order and, after those, a few other Gospels were written which did not compare in quality to the others and were soon discarded. Then the creative power that had produced this new genre of literature disappeared. The coming of Jesus Christ opened an age of miracles; none was more significant than the miracle that produced the writing of the Gospels themselves.

Who Mark was we can say with no assurance at all. We know he was a Christian who lived in Rome. Beyond that we can only make guesses about him. Was he a leader of the church in Rome? or merely an educated Christian scribe who was given the task of compiling what others had gathered? the John Mark who travelled at times with Paul? or someone who knew Peter well? was he himself an eyewitness to the ministry of Jesus? perhaps even the unnamed young man who fled the Garden of Gethsemane or the equally anonymous young man who welcomed the women to the garden of the empty grave? We simply cannot answer any of these questions. The best we can say is that he wrote the earliest of the Gospels for the beleaguered Christians of Rome and that he wrote it sometime in the decade after A.D. 63. These facts,

however, account for some of the emphases made in his Gospel.

He first emphasized that through Jesus Christ Christians have the strength to face martyrdom. This message was much needed in Rome and Mark pointed it up by stressing the fact that Jesus himself died as the first Christian martyr. But he did not die according to the will of his enemies; he died according to the will of God. Jesus Christ himself went to the cross and in so doing he demonstrated that martyrdom is well within the purpose of God for his people; and Christ's example and his continuing presence with them strengthened those who were faithful to him.

Mark's second major emphasis was confessional: he presented his own witness to Jesus and invited others to make up their minds about him. This interest was written into the brilliant opening sentence of his book: "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." That two-fold statement about Jesus corresponded to the two basic questions the Christian congregation in Rome had concerning him. The Jews in the congregation could not understand a messiah who suffered and the Greeks could not believe that one person could incorporate in his own life the total life of God. For the Jew, therefore, Mark called Jesus "the Christ" avowing that, despite his tragic death, Jesus was indeed sent forth from God; and, for the Greek, he said Jesus was the Son of God in whom the essence of God was to be found. This same confessional concern was expressed in a concluding scene of the book when the Roman centurion, standing by the cross and witnessing the death of Jesus, said, "Truly this man was the Son of God"; in other words, divinity was not found in the empire and emperor of Rome, as a centurion with his irrevocable commitment to Rome might be expected to believe, but instead dwelt in this broken figure crucified by his own command.

Scenes drawn from three other key moments in Mark's Gospel expressed this same confessional concern. John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus to ask, "Are you he who is to come or are we to look for another?" Jesus did not reply directly. He simply asked John to consider the evidence and make up his own mind about Jesus: the deaf hear, the dumb speak, the blind see, the lame walk, the dead are raised, the poor have good news preached to them. A similar pattern was followed in the account of Peter's confession. Jesus had asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" and they had responded with the most exalted titles known to Jewish life: John the Baptist raised from the dead, Elijah who will come before the messiah does, one of the prophets. Jesus then asked them to make their own confession, "who do you say that I am?" and Peter responded, "You are the Christ." The pattern is repeated in the trial of Jesus. Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" and Jesus' reply put the matter squarely back to Pilate: "You say so." From Mark's point of view, Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Son of God. But the reader of the Gospel is compelled to search the evidence and see how he conquered sin, sickness, law, temptation, the ravages of nature, death itself, and then make his own affirmation about him.

Mark pointed out also that Jesus' life and ministry recapitulated the whole experience of the people of God in the Old Testament: Jesus was the New Israel, the new people of God, and he invited others to share in this new creation. God had called him in baptism to be his own, as at the Sea he had called Israel. The baptism behind him, Jesus had gone into the wilderness as the people of Israel went from Egypt into the wilderness and, like them, Jesus had been strengthened and supported by God. In Jesus God brought together the royal line of David and the suffering servant so lovingly spoken of by Isaiah of Babylon; the new king had to suffer in order to win from the people the loyalty due him. The king died but God raised him from the dead; and out of the resurrection emerged a new kingdom of God, a new people of God, bound together not by race or nation or class but by the new spirit let loose in the world through him. In his own person Jesus fulfilled the totality of God's activity in the Old Testament and gave it new meaning for our own time.

It was around such major emphases as these and it was by skillfully employing the traditions about Jesus that Mark constructed his Gospel. He began his Gospel with a preamble that related Jesus' ministry to the Old Testament and brought him to the attention of people in Galilee by his baptism at the hands of John. Following his baptism, Jesus went in- to the wilderness and came forth from it confident in the power of God within him. He immediately performed messianic tasks: he healed the sick and conquered the evil forces that had enslaved human life. In response to this, however, some persons--Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians--challenged his right to do so. But Jesus again demonstrated his mighty works: by calming the storm, calming the demoniac boy, healing the woman, raising the dead child, opening the mouth of the dumb, feeding the multitude. With these works before them, Jesus raised the question about himself: Who do you say that I am? When the disciples confessed that he was the Christ, the tenor of the story changed; to Mark, this confession was the turning point in Jesus' ministry. From that time on he set himself to journey to Jerusalem to die. In Jerusalem he cleansed the temple and engaged in additional controversy with those opposed to him, at each point making more clear the purpose of his ministry. Finally, the forces of antagonism joined hands against him; he was arrested, tried, sentenced, and placed on the cross. There he died. But he was raised from the dead and when the women came to anoint his body they were met by a young man who told them that Jesus was not there, he had risen and gone before them into Galilee. Here Mark's Gospel ended, the first and earliest continuous narrative of the activity of God through Jesus Christ.

II.

It was quickly followed by other Gospels. A second to be written was the Gospel according to Matthew.

At first glance this Gospel appears to be closely related to the other one, and in many

respects that impression is accurate. Matthew took the basic outline that Mark gave to a Gospel and employed it in his own book. He expanded upon it, however, so much so that scholars formerly thought that Mark was an abridgment of Matthew rather than an independent writing. The deeper one penetrates into Matthew, however, the clearer it is that this Gospel had themes that were indigenous to it.

The primary theme of the book was its emphasis upon righteousness. This can be defined as "getting on right terms with God, neighbor, self, and the world around through Jesus Christ." The theme was set out in the scene of the baptism. John the Baptizer wanted to know why Jesus had come to him to be baptized and Jesus replied, "In order to fulfill all righteousness." The theme came to high expression in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount: "Seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness." The last parable of Jesus given in the Gospel brought it to a fitting conclusion: the king, seated on his throne, was about to make his judgments on the validity of human lives and the judgments were made solely on the basis of whether the person had acted righteously: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." righteous person is the one who does these things.

There seems also to be an internal organization in this Gospel that is somewhat akin to the five books of the Law of Moses. It is extremely dangerous to try to impress on these ancient writings some scheme of our own for understanding them, and I do so with reluctance; yet scholars have isolated five major sections, which they call "books," inside this one book:

The Book of Discipleship . . . chapters 3 through 7
The Book of Apostleship . . . chapters 8 through 10
The Book of the Mystery . . . chapters 11 through 13
The Book of the Church . . . chapters 14 through 18
The Book of the Future . . . chapters 19 through 25

Each section began with narrative material and ended with teaching material; since this teaching material was quite different and much more extensive than that of Mark's Gospel, we are indebted to Matthew for having preserved it.

To the body of this text were added two things: the passion story at the end, with additional accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, and a prologue at the beginning. The passion narrative was so similar to Mark's that we need not comment on it but the prologue was unique. This prologue--our Christmas story--was constructed upon Old Testament passages that Matthew found pertinent to Jesus and, in his selection of text and event, the author of this Gospel went further than Mark had in pointing out how Jesus had

recapitulated in his own person the Old Testament experience. Matthew began with a genealogy tracing Jesus' lineage back to Abraham and he neatly schematized it as fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the deportation into Babylon, and fourteen generations from then until the time of Christ. I have not given much attention to the numerology of the Bible, but it is important in this instance.

"Fourteen" is "twice seven" and "seven" is the perfect number, its components being "three," the number for heaven and "four," the number for earth; seven is the perfection of everything in heaven and on earth and twice seven is infinitely better than that--how neat Matthew's scheme! In these stories of Jesus' birth, he again worked out a five-fold pattern using five Old Testament passages as the basis of his narrative: he told how Jesus was born of a virgin; had his nativity in the favored city of Bethlehem, the home of David; was taken into Egypt as an infant so that God may be said to have drawn his son from Egypt; fulfilled the prophecy of the wailing and loud lamentation of Judah as the infants of Bethlehem were slain by Herod; and went to Nazareth that he might be called a Nazarene. It appears that Matthew did indeed draw upon some five-fold patterns of Old Testament Scriptures to interpret the coming of Jesus Christ.

This Gospel also exhibits a concern with problems of the organization of the church and its congregations. In chapters 14 through 18 especially but with hints of it elsewhere, Matthew turned to questions about worship, theology, ethics and leadership which did not appear in Mark. This interest parallels a similar movement within the Judaism of Matthew's time. When the war over Jerusalem between Zealots and Romans ended with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, rabbinic leaders settled near the town of Jamnia on the Mediterranean coast and began to organize the oral tradition of Judaism and to codify the Jewish laws and Scriptures. Matthew showed a similar interest arising from a similar situation and time, and this would indicate that this writer and his congregation were in contact with the Jewish movements of the day.

This information has led scholars to suppose that Matthew was writing his Gospel for a Christian congregation composed largely of Jewish people and was attempting to interpret Christ to people who were deeply nurtured in the Old Testament and the five books of the Law. Since this gospel showed both a knowledge of the catastrophe that befell the Holy City in A.D. 70, and indicated much interest in the organizational problems faced by the Christian churches after that event, I believe this book was composed in the late seventies or early eighties of the first century of the Christian era.

III.

The third synoptic is the Gospel according to Luke. This was the missionary Gospel of the early church and has to be read alongside its companion book, the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. With its missionary emphasis came themes worth noting.

This is the universal Gospel. Its birth stories told that Jesus would be a light to the Gentiles, and that when Jesus was raised from the dead he would announce that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all the nations. Luke related his account of Jesus' birth not to Jewish history but to events like the census of Caesar taking place in the Roman empire; he traced the ancestry of Jesus not to Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, but to Adam, the father of all humankind; he omitted certain particularly Jewish stories that Matthew gave and, when in his second volume he described the missionary journeys of Paul, he ended his book with the Christian Gospel being preached in the city of Rome, the center of the world. Jesus as Luke portrayed him is the savior for all the world.

This Gospel has a special concern for outcast people. It made much of Jesus' work among the Samaritan people, and who was more outcast, according to Jewish thinking, than the Samaritans. It gave special prominence to Jesus' ministry among the publicans, to Zacchaeus, the tax collector, to the thief on the cross; it alone related the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coins, the lost son. It showed Jesus' empathy for the poor; it told the story of the rich fool, of the rich man's indifference to the poverty-stricken Lazarus, of Zacchaeus's decision to give half his goods to the poor; and when the invited guests did not come to the feast the householder had prepared he extended his invitation to the poor of the land. There was also concern over the plight of women: in the birth stories, Luke centered his attention on the mother Mary; he gave prominence to Mary and Martha; and he told parables whose central characters were women. The Gospel that goes to all the world goes especially to its outcasts.

There is in addition a decided stress on the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came to Jesus at baptism, directed him in his mission, strengthened him in prayer. This same spirit was poured out upon all people during that particular Feast of Pentecost which followed Jesus' resurrection and it empowered the church to carry on its mission. More than any other, Luke's Gospel is the Gospel of the Holy Spirit.

Luke is moreover concerned about the mission of Paul. Had it not been for the writer of this Gospel, the acts of Paul would not be known in the detail now before us and he shared Paul's zeal for mission and for the universality of the good news. Luke also was the most skilled writer in the New Testament; his Greek had an elegance about it that was unmatched by the other documents we have. Since it followed the outline given by Mark, it must postdate that Gospel; and since it drew upon material similar to that in Matthew, it was written around the same time as Matthew, or even perhaps a little later.

That is hypothesis, to be sure; as with the other Gospels we do not have sufficient evidence to be certain about the provenance of this writing. But we are assured that these three Gospels were intimately related to each other, not only because they each told of Jesus Christ but because each of the others accepted the form Mark developed and they interacted with one another in the material they presented. At the same time, they had their different and individual emphases; and seeing these emphases together, we can

understand more of the breadth and depth of the central person of the Christian faith, Jesus of Nazareth, whom his followers called the Christ and the Son of God.