

Chapter 1

THE GOSPELS AND CANONICAL CRITICISM*

Introduction

In recent years, the study of canon by two eminent Old Testament scholars, Brevard Childs and James Sanders, has raised important questions about the use of Scripture for theology and ethics. Before we attempt to assess the implications of their conclusions for the New Testament, especially the Gospels, it is necessary to set the so-called 'canonical criticism' within the context of earlier and concurrent views.

One common way of 'doing' theology in a precritical or anti-critical mode is to treat Scripture as a quarry of data about God, persons, the world, etc. By depending on one's knowledge or a concordance, one then collects information, wherever it may be found, about these topics. No matter where the material comes from, it is complementary and of equal weight. The text is read 'flatly'. Little, if any attention is given to genre, literary contexts, historical circumstances, etc. Sometimes, the central, organizing principle emerges from the professional expertise of the scholar. Thus, the heavily forensic, moral-governmental cast to Grotius's theology was a function of his career as a jurist.¹

Related to such a 'complementary' reading of the text is harmonization, which gained a certain sophistication with Tatian in the middle of the second century. This scholar did away with the divergences of the multiple Gospel canon to produce a single, smooth, consistent narrative of Jesus' life. The result was so influential in the Eastern Church,

* This essay first appeared as E.E. Lemcio, 'The Gospels and Canonical Criticism', *BTB* 11 (1981), pp. 114-22.

1. H.O. Wiley, *Christian Theology*, II (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1952), pp. 252-54.

especially in Syria, that for a time it displaced the canonical Gospels. And, though never achieving canonical status in the West, Tatian's *Diatessaron* became extremely popular, as evidenced by the numerous European translations which have survived.²

Eventually, even Syria returned to the fourfold Gospel canon, despite the difficulties which diversity and multiplicity brought with them. Of course, the suppression of written harmonies did not prevent harmonistic exegesis which flourished. Yet, when this failed, one could appeal to the principle which underlay the diversity. The supreme exponent of such a reductionism was Origen. When unable to harmonize plural accounts of the same or similar teaching or event in Jesus' life, he resorted to the mystical or spiritual truth lying behind and beneath what he was prepared to acknowledge as 'material falsehood'.³

There were more sensitive theologians like Calvin who, even in his harmonistic commentary on the Gospels, exhibited a keen historical judgment in observing that Matthew collected teaching from various times and settings into the block of material called 'the Sermon on the Mount'.⁴ Luther, exercising a daring christocentricity, ranked the New Testament writings according to the clarity with which they proclaimed Christ. Little wonder then, that of the Gospels, John's headed the list.⁵ However, despite these historical and theological sensibilities, we must conclude that there is nothing of the all-pervading, historical consciousness which began to emerge with the Enlightenment. One could appeal to the whole of Scripture as authoritative for faith and practice while engaging in various degrees of harmonization, reductionism and preferential treatment.

For those scholars who tried to take the Enlightenment seriously and still remain Christian, Scripture became a mine of historical rather than dogmatic information which theologians and ethicists appropriated to their tasks. Thus, during the nineteenth century, the

2. H. Merkel, *Die Pluralität der Evangelien als theologisches und exegetisches Problem in der alten Kirche*, XII (Bern: Peter Lang, 1978).

3. Origen, *Commentary on John X.4*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, X (ed. and trans. A. Menzies; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), p. 383.

4. D.W. and T.T. Torrance (eds.), *Calvin's Commentaries: A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke*, I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 168.

5. E.T. Bachmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, XXXV (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), pp. 361-62.

primary goal was to recover the so-called historical Jesus so that one might pattern belief and behavior on his life.⁶ This conviction, chastened to be sure, is reflected currently in Joachim Jeremias's first volume of the *Theology of the New Testament*. Here is essentially a systematization of a lifetime's effort of recovering Jesus' *ipsissima verba*. A less ambitious cadre of scholars has been content to elicit at least his very voice (*vox*) or mind (*mens*).

Form and tradition critics, less certain of this endeavor regarding its possibility and legitimacy, attempted instead to trace the history of the early church's beliefs about Jesus from the tendencies of the Synoptic tradition and from various kerygmata and confessions. This approach is evident as the principle upon which Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament* is organized, as a glance at the table of contents quickly confirms.

Redaction criticism narrows its attention to four particular moments of that larger history, the circumstances which called forth the Gospels as creative, literary-theological achievements. The Evangelists were not merely faceless tradents in an amorphous 'early Church', but pastors/theologians sensitive to the needs of particular congregations.⁷ Literary critics (and here we shall include the structuralists) are less concerned about the redactional process used by the evangelists to achieve their ends than they are about the final product of redaction and how its structure and dramatic action communicate to the reader or hearer.⁸

Together, these approaches were an advance over the earlier ones. However, new problems emerged. Theologians and ethicists felt obliged to prefer Mark and exclude John as the basis for their 'Lives of Jesus'. Furthermore, the authority for faith and life lay not in any text but behind it, in the scholar's often speculative and imaginative reconstructions. In the process, the diverse and multiple character of the documents was ignored too.

The difficulties were only somewhat alleviated in form, redaction and literary-critical study. In fact new questions were raised. At what

6. A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1961).

7. N. Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* (London: SPCK Press, 1970), pp. 21-39.

8. N. Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 70.

stage of the church's developing beliefs about Jesus was one to locate authority for belief and behavior? A naive primitivism regarded the earliest kerygma and creed as best. But supposing they had been immature or even positively false? Moreover, a deliberate or merely practical preference for this tradition or that Gospel has its drawbacks too. When theologians favor Luke in formulating a liberation theology, does this not run the risk of being rather sophisticated proof-texting? Of course no single verse is lifted from its Lukan context, but in effect one is appropriating an individual component of a multiple, evangelic corpus which is often thematically and literarily interdependent. Furthermore, one is in danger of simply proclaiming the theological and ethical agenda designed by an individual evangelist for a particular, historical situation rather than the word of God through his Christ to the church today. Such preferential treatment has serious consequences. Myopia can lead to ignorance. Concentrating narrowly upon a single tradition or Gospel runs the risk of idolatry by confusing reality with a single perception of it. Failure to give other witnesses their legitimate place promotes heresy—the opposite (I shall later argue) of the Gospel canon's catholicity.

Canonical Criticism

Within this complex debate, some of which they have generated, Childs and Sanders raise common questions, although their answers vary sharply. To what extent, in what sense and how should the canon be considered as authoritative when Scripture is appealed to in theological and ethical reflection?

Childs's fundamental claim is that the canonical text alone is the medium of divine revelation. Only the literary precipitates of the original *Sitze im Leben* have survived. What matters is a text's *Sitz im Leben des Kanons*. Historical criticism is useful only in bringing one to the meaning of a text in its final, canonical form and status. It is this which has nourished the life of the church throughout most of its history. Not the Isaiah(s) of history but the Isaiah of canon brings the community to faith and obedience. As a member of the believing community within which canon emerged, the biblical scholar must acknowledge this datum with full theological seriousness. Of course, Childs does not deny that God has revealed himself in the history of Israel, Jesus and the church. Rather, he insists that these are not iden-

tical with historians' reconstructions of those histories. Furthermore, such reconstruction is not only often impossible to achieve, it is also illegitimate as the basis of theology and ethics. (One is here reminded of the arguments leveled by dialectical theologians against the foundations of liberal Christianity in the twenties and thirties.⁹)

While it would be a mistake to regard Childs as a 'canonical fundamentalist' whose efforts turn the clock back to the precritical era, it is nevertheless fair to observe that he has not yet developed a coherent and comprehensive account of the continuity between the original saving events, the canonical text, and appropriate historical and theological methods of bridging the two polarities. Positively, he has raised questions that cannot be ignored about the historical and theological status of Scripture's final, canonical form.

If Childs emphasizes the canon as a *product* of the community's faith, Sanders stresses its *process*, a phenomenon which both preceded and followed the moments of 'intense canonical activity' which gathered certain authoritative documents together. This process consisted in preserving the reports of God's speech-acts in ancient contexts in a manner that could adapt them to contemporary ones. Here canonization and hermeneutics become almost identical phenomena.

Furthermore, the canonical product contains multiple ways (paradigms) of assessing and communicating the speech-acts of God to his people and their responses to him. These paradigms emerged during a millennium and a half across five cultures, producing a rich diversity of idiom, language and point of view. And, since all of these are legitimated by the written canon, none can claim final and absolute allegiance. There is a mutual relativizing going on all the time so that the only absolute is God, rather than a particular way of perceiving, communicating and responding to him. Sanders calls this the 'monotheizing pluralism' of canon.

Within the canon is a hermeneutical mode which employs two theological perspectives in a circumstantial way: God's steadfastness in maintaining covenant obligations and his creative freedom to judge his people when they violate the covenant and to devise new responses in the face of different circumstances. This theological stability and adaptability is reflected in the way God's spokespersons maintain or adapt tradition. Like them, the sensitive interpreter must determine

9. B.S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), pp. 46-106.

which category better suits the needs of the community and how it should function: as a support in the hour of distress and weakness or as a challenge to the tendency to confuse one's power, wisdom, government and righteousness with God's.¹⁰

Such diversity is less important for Childs who tends to work with it dialectically on the level of the text as it is illuminated by major commentators throughout the history of Christian and Jewish interpretation.¹¹ In addition to moving among biblical texts, Sanders uses the full range of critical disciplines to discover the means by which they were adapted in various contexts. While he has not given a systematic account of the process and its relation to the original events and the final form of the text, Sanders does grant the historical-critical enterprise positive, theological validity. There is in his method a more comprehensive attempt to recognize that throughout the Church's life, interpretative traditions have paralleled the text in an effort to enable it to speak again. One could say that historical and canonical criticism at its best are 'our way' since the Enlightenment of doing the same thing.

A Test Case: The Gospels

Childs's insistence upon the product of canonization, that is, that which the believing community preserved, and Sanders's greater stress upon the processes which brought it into being and made it perennially relevant because adaptable may be twin foci through which to view New Testament phenomena, too. Yet one should not proceed too quickly. The internal shape of the canon, consisting as it does of numerous genres and sub-units, requires that we attend to particular features that may not be characteristic of other sub-units. Paul's manner of citing the Old Testament and Jesus tradition does not concur with the Evangelists' or James's. Consequently, one cannot simply align them all when appealing to Scripture for our warrants.

Although limitations of space forbid a thoroughgoing study now, the point may be illustrated by focusing on the multiple Gospel

10. J.A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 116; and J.A. Sanders, 'Hermeneutics', *IDBSup* (ed. K. Crim; New York: Abingdon Press, 1976), pp. 402-407.

11. B.S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), pp. 42-46.

subcanon. Perhaps the issues raised by Childs and Sanders can be illustrated here more clearly than elsewhere. The nature of the fourfold Gospel corpus consists in two polarities which exist in perpetual tension: the preservation and adaptation of tradition. (And we might go further than both to say that the written canon which emerged sanctioned what was to be preserved as well as the mode and scope of its adaptation.)

Several features, literary and theological, warrant treating the Gospels collectively as well as individually. There is no other biblical sub-unit of its kind. Multiple, parallel accounts of the same person or event are not to be found elsewhere. The closest example might be the story of David in 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles, and yet the canon separates them into different sections: the Former Prophets and the Writings. Nowhere in the New Testament is there material both by and about the central figure of the New Testament. Although Jesus tradition was preserved elsewhere in the early church (Rom. 12.14, 20; 1 Cor. 7.10, 11; 9.14, 23-26; Jas 2.5), here it was appealed to 'with a vengeance'. Furthermore, the Gospels' theological outlook constitutes a unity. While one can agree that the discontinuity between Jesus or the Gospels and Paul has been overdrawn, it is still not possible to argue that Paul merely presupposed both the extent and the outlook of the evangelic tradition. The apostle would agree that the earthly Jesus was God's final and foremost word to humankind; but it does not appear that he thought it of vital importance (in the sense that the Evangelists did) to know what he had said about God's will and what the response of his people should be. For Paul, it was what the risen Lord had 'said' to him that mattered most. So far as the Evangelists were concerned, the word of the risen Christ was intimately bound up with the words of the earthly Jesus.

Other factors invite, if not demand, us to view all four 'synoptically'. Without denying that each was addressed to a particular situation, it is time to protest that points made about their circumstantial character have been over-done. Their literary and theological interdependence says as much. Something quite standard about Mark led Matthew to preserve (and of course often adapt) 90 per cent of his material. Luke, too, felt obliged to incorporate half of Mark's Gospel and either share with Matthew or incorporate from him the material designated as 'Q'. Even if John was ignorant of or deliberately avoided the Synoptic tradition, he did make his point by employing a

similar genre. And, of course, there are those who argue that the Fourth Evangelist knew one or more of the Synoptics. At the very least (and this is not inconsiderable) the Passion Narrative represents among all four a significant amount of common ground.

Certainly Matthew and Luke (and Mark by implication) often disregarded the importance of the literary-theological contexts and ecclesiastical *Sitze im Leben* of their predecessors when they applied the tradition to their own day. But where the traditions were left exactly 'as is' or essentially intact, they assumed that the truth preserved was standard and that subsequent *Sitze im Leben* would at least be similar enough. Consequently, there is a stabilizing and universalizing phenomenon occurring as well as an adapting and contextualizing one. In other words, the Evangelists assume some fundamental things about God's deed in Christ and the standard needs of his people that transcend particular times and places.

Yet, in thus putting the matter of stability, I do not want to minimize the nature or degree of adaptation which went on. Stylistic and apologetic changes excluded, substantial modifications (in instances which can hardly be Jesus' own repeated utterances) represent the word of the living Lord being addressed to various circumstances. This insight of the early form critics complements the sentiments of the venerable Bishop Papias whose long life straddled the first and second centuries. To the plethora of books, he preferred the 'the living voice' preserved in the oral tradition.¹²

Perhaps this is the genius of the multiple Gospel canon: it illustrates vividly that the living voice cannot be frozen into a single, written form, that its rich undertones and overtones may not be limited to a monotone. Rather, the one but polyvalent word has inflections and nuances that dare not be filtered out by a narrow selection of witnesses. Yet there are limits. Words cannot mean anything and everything. From a field which eventually grew to two dozen or so, these four and no others were admitted. Such 'standard deviations' from the words of the earthly Jesus were not thought to conflict with the mind of Christ in the way that the others did.

At this point, the New Testament scholar might object that this sort of approach goes beyond the boundaries of one's specialty because the

12. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.3-4, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, I (ed. and trans. A.C. McGiffert; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), p. 171.

canon by this time reflects a catholicity wherein the tradition was stabilized, standardized, universalized and legitimated. But the nature of that catholicity is such that it tolerated (if not celebrated) process, particularity, diversity and pluralism within the Gospel tradition: *e pluribus unum* in an enviable sense. One ought not to forget that this second-century corpus has allowed us to view (along broad lines, anyway) the tendencies of the tradition and its appropriation by the Evangelists in four, concrete circumstances during the *first century*.

Consequently, even the 'pure' New Testament scholar may feel at home in another *Sitz im Leben* besides that of a Gospels-producing atmosphere in the latter part of the first century. This is the subsequent circumstance which prompted them to be collected into a corpus, *der Sitz im Leben des Kanons der Evangelien*. Even at this late date (for a *Neutestamentler*), the church exercised great restraint in avoiding either preferential treatment of one or of harmonizing all into a single, non-controversial story. Although future generations might succumb to one or the other of these temptations, early in the second century the church risked the stigma of a multiple and diverse canon. In so doing, it bequeathed forever four paradigms by which to 'conjugate the verbs of God's activity' in Jesus.¹³

If this assessment of the Gospels is correct, what then are some implications for Gospels' study *per se* and for the manner by which one appeals to this part of Scripture as in some sense authority for Christian faith and practice? At least one implication is that comparative Gospel study will need to assume status as an end in itself rather than as merely a source for gathering raw material for the redaction critic. The documents must rather be viewed as providing data for the development of canonical hermeneutics, a sample of which follows.

The Beatitudes

The point can be made most sharply if we take as our subject the Beatitudes in Mt. 5.1-12 and Lk. 6.17-26. It would not be unfair to say that Matthew's version has been appealed to more in the church's preaching and instruction than Luke's. John Topel has estimated that of nearly a thousand entries in a recent bibliography covering the entire Christian period, only 3.5 per cent have attended to the Lukan version. Probably the advent of redaction criticism has lessened the

imbalance somewhat in the last 25 years during which roughly 23 per cent of studies on the Sermon focused on Luke's. Perhaps the appeal to Luke by liberation theologians and others who are concerned about the church's attitude toward economics, politics and society has increased the attention, too.

Further work on the Lukan sermon must be encouraged to balance things out, since the canon itself gives neither priority. But two questions beg to be answered. Why has the inequality occurred at all, and what shall we do with both once equilibrium has been achieved? A historical theologian will need to answer the former query, but New Testament scholars must address the second. Supposing we could achieve consensus on the materials, methods and results of the Evangelists' redaction, what then? How does one determine the biblical understanding of blessedness? Is it the poor in spirit or the poor? Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness or the hungry? How can theology and ethics draw upon both instead of resorting to preferential treatment, harmonization or reductionism?

We can attempt an answer to these vexing questions only by admitting that the essential historical issue (what did Jesus teach about blessedness?) and the traditio-historical ones are so problematic that one cannot as yet appeal to any kind of consensus or convincing alternative by which to chart the process of adaptation from original *Sitz im Leben* to canonical context. The data are not firm enough and our tools are too blunt. Yet perhaps some intimation of earlier issues might still be discernable by observing the Evangelists from a canonical point of view.

The place to begin is with some attention to the theological and religious atmosphere within which Jesus and the Evangelists lived, moved and had their being. A brief excursion into the Old Testament and Jewish background of the Beatitudes (an exercise in the history of Jewish religion) discloses that much of the vocabulary and theology of both the Matthean and Lukan versions can be accounted for in two wisdom psalms, 34 and 37 (where the greater concentration occurs). The coextensive vocabulary and phrasing (apart from the introductory 'Blessed') is striking, especially in the LXX (see also Isa. 57.15). But so is the inclusive idea of spiritual poverty ('the poor and needy' is parallel to the 'upright in heart' in v. 14) and economic poverty (the little which the righteous have is better than the wealth of many wicked, v. 16; see also vv. 21, 26). Furthermore, the future reversal

13. Sanders, 'Hermeneutics', p. 407.

of the fortunes of both the wicked rich and the righteous poor, which appears clearly only in Luke, is also embraced within Psalm 37. (Such a contrast is not entirely absent from Matthew's version if the $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\iota$ is intensive: these [and not the others] will inherit the earth, etc.)

Furthermore, this ideal was maintained, or at least was claimed, in the theology and common life of the Qumran sect. In fragments of their commentary on Psalm 37 (4QPs 37), it is clear that they interpreted this passage to speak of themselves. Moreover, the sectarians referred to themselves as the 'poor of spirit'. Since the expression is the construct state in Hebrew, it functions in contexts which refer either to the inner condition of the faithful (i.e. 'the poor in spirit', cf. Mt. 5.3) or to their voluntary, economic state (i.e. 'the poor who have the spirit'). The latter use resembles Lk. 6.20.¹⁴ Here the context suggests that the addressees are the followers of Jesus and not the poor in general.

In reality, such an integrated ideal was (and is) often bifurcated into a kind of ethical dualism. Yahweh's commitment to the kingship and Temple, interpreted unconditionally *à la* Nathan (2 Sam. 7.11-16) led to a disregard for moral responsibility which some prophets blamed for the downfall of the monarchy (Jer. 7.1-15). Or, it was thought that faithful, cultic observance was possible without attention to social and economic justice, another dichotomy which the prophets denounced (Isa. 58). Matthew casts Jesus in the prophetic mold of restoring the missing element of a larger whole. In ch. 23, which structurally forms an intimate, though remote, context for chs. 5-7 (esp. 5.20), Jesus upbraids the scribes and Pharisees for not practicing what they preach (vv. 2-4) for attending to outward purity without concern for the inner life (vv. 26-29). It is not as though the externals are unimportant. By reminding them of the 'weightier matters of the law' such as justice, mercy and faith, Jesus does not deny the validity of tithing which ought to be done (v. 23).

This drive toward a righteousness higher than the Pharisees' (5.10) dominates the near environment of the Beatitudes. It is of a deeper kind which describes the inner attitude that lies at the heart of external acts. Thus, anger is as serious as murder, the predatory eye as adulterous as the act itself (5.21-30). Such an understanding of

14. D. Flusser, 'Blessed are the Poor in Spirit', *Israel Exploration Journal* 10 (1960), p. 5; and D. Flusser, 'Some Notes to the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12, Luke 6:20-26)', *Immanuel* 8 (1978), p. 42.

righteousness seeks God's approval in secret, not the public approval of persons (6.1-18). Of course, one must have food and clothing; but concern for these should not consume one's existence (6.19-21, 25-32). If God's government and his righteousness are sought above all, they will be forthcoming (v. 33).

How intriguing that Matthew, whose Gospel opens with such an internal, spiritual aspect of righteousness, concludes with its complement. In the most detailed description of final judgment in the New Testament (25.31-46), the blessed (here $\epsilon\upsilon\lambda\omicron\gamma\eta\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\iota$, v. 34) are described as righteous (v. 37) because they (Gentile nations? Christians?) ministered to the least of Christ's brothers (Christian missionaries? the needy anywhere?) who had been hungry, naked and imprisoned (vv. 37-40).¹⁵ Therefore, one cannot claim that Matthew's understanding of blessedness (the poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness) excludes, in an absolute sense, the economic dimension. Rather, the overall redactional schema of Matthew's Gospel leads us to conclude that they represent an effort, perhaps an exaggerated one, to restore a missing element in the Judaism (and Christianity) of his day.

A similar case could be made for Luke. As with the first Evangelist, his ordering of the traditions sets the stage for the Beatitudes in ch. 6. In the Magnificat (1.52, 53), there resounds the theme of the great reversal (see Ps. 37 throughout) which will change the fortunes of the poor and rich, weak and powerful. From the Baptizer's hell-fire and brimstone preaching (3.7-15) to Jesus' sermon in Nazareth (4.16-21), the prevailing theme is God's good news to the poor and oppressed. It should come as no surprise, then, that in Luke's Beatitudes, stress on the inner quality of the blessed is absent (Mt. 5.4, 5, 7-9) and that blessings instead are pronounced upon the poor, hungry and distressed (6.20, 21). Moreover, woes fall upon the rich, full, happy and well-reputed (vv. 24-26).

Yet, Jesus' audience is not simply the vast crowd which came from everywhere to the plain (vv. 17-19). The clear data from the context suggest the economic poverty and hunger of the disciples (v. 20) who had earlier left their livelihoods to follow Jesus (5.1-11, 27-28). No one else could be described as being abused for the sake of the Son of

15. J. Mánek, 'Mit wem identifiziert sich Jesus (Matt. 25:31-46)?', in S. Smalley and B. Lindars (eds.), *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 15-25.

Man (v. 22). Furthermore, their experience is compared with that of the prophets (v. 23). The reference is clearly to God's spokespersons, his loyal representatives. However, the same must be said of those who receive the woes. Here the second-person form of address is constantly sustained, and those thus identified are compared to the false prophets who enjoyed a good reputation in their day (v. 26).

So, while underscoring real poverty and hunger in a way that Matthew does not, Luke nevertheless does not neglect the 'spiritual' aspects of blessedness. To make his point, he portrays Jesus as challenging a sector of Judaism (and consequently Christianity) which had excluded economics from its concept of true blessedness. Support for this analysis comes from Luke's second volume, which recounts the earliest church in Jerusalem practicing economic poverty (Acts 2.44-45; 4.32-37). This behavior and its attendant motivation was taken so seriously that Ananias and Sapphira forfeit their lives when it is discovered that they had given to the church only part of the proceeds from property which they had sold (5.1-11) and falsified the report of how much money had been made from property sold.

Might one go further? If we take seriously the ancient testimony of Papias about the factors which determined the form and content of Peter's preaching (the needs of the community), then perhaps we can cautiously draw some further conclusions regarding the Evangelists' respective *Sitze im Leben*. By examining the 'positive print' of his Gospel, we inferred that Matthew challenged a community tending to forget about the deep, internal resources necessary for producing good fruit (7.15-20). Luke served notice to a community 'at home' in the world, enjoying the fruits of piety: good reputation and material success which so often lure one from the original blessedness. In both instances, each Evangelist separately restored the integrity of themes expressed so naturally and holistically in passages such as Psalm 37 and embodied, according to their documents, by the sectarians at Qumran.

In time, the original *Sitze im Leben* within which the Gospels emerged vanished. Only their literary precipitates remained. Yet, the church of the late first or early second century, in drawing Matthew and Luke together, thereby recreated canonically those original polarities which called the Gospels forth. In other words, Matthew and Luke 'spoke' to each other in the way that they had once addressed their respective communities. In the process, the integrity

of those original addresses (and that of Ps. 37, etc.) is restored— but along different lines. There is no harmonization, preferential treatment or reduction to a single principle of blessedness. The presence of both prevents either from becoming the exclusive or dominant paradigm for conjugating the verbs of the community's response to God's covenant. Each is there to exercise upon the church the challenge most appropriate to its particular situation. Of course, it is not only a matter of 'afflicting the comfortable'. The other paradigm serves to 'comfort the afflicted'. The interpreter must be sensitive enough to determine which the church needs. In a pluralistic church, the character of the canon's diversity enables it to speak both a particular and a universal word to the people of God. One is reminded of the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. The degree of reformation expected and reinforcement promised varies according to needs represented in the seven different circumstances. Nevertheless, each letter ends with the refrain, 'hear what the Spirit says to the churches'.

The validity of this method can be tested by seeing if we have avoided the criticisms leveled against the other approaches. If there is a preferential aspect, it is circumstantial and temporary. Harmonization, too, is avoided in the process. Both definitions of blessedness are embraced but stand in dialectic relation to each other, thereby eschewing reductionism altogether. In so doing, the canon's stability and adaptability have been recognized and exploited.

The Great Commandment

Another example of viewing, from a canonical vantage point, how the Evangelists 'do' theology and ethics appears in Jesus' command to love God and neighbor which all three Synoptic writers recount. In this instance, the historical issue is not as difficult as in the Beatitudes. That one can see here the main thrust of Jesus' teaching is not doubted even by a skeptical criticism.¹⁶ And, although the intervening tradition-historical process remains obscure, one is able to observe how the synoptics adapt the teaching to their situations.

The commands to love God with one's entire being (Deut. 6.5) and one's neighbor (i.e. fellow Israelite) as oneself (Lev. 19.18) are nowhere joined in the Old Testament. They are, however, to be found

16. G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 109-17.

together in the Judaism reflected by the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (Dan 5.3; Issachar 5.2; 7.6) Consequently their joint formulation is not specifically Christian. Yet, identifying them as being fundamental to the law (Mt. 22.40), superior to the cultus (Mk 12.33) and the way to eternal life (Lk. 10.28) is unique to the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels.

As often in multiple tradition, setting and *personae* differ. Matthew and Mark place the teaching in Jerusalem while Luke includes it in the travel narrative. Jesus' interlocutor varies, too: a lawyer in Matthew and Luke (22.35; 10.25), a scribe in Mark (12.28). These details, however, are far less significant than others. Although love to God with one's entire being maintains priority throughout, Matthew alone makes the point that the command to love one's neighbor as oneself is *like* the 'great commandment', to love God (v. 39). It cannot be regarded as secondary in the sense of being less 'spiritual' or optional. Then the First Evangelist uses this analysis of their dual priority to make the rest of Scripture relative to them. In a way that all philosophy is a footnote to Plato and Aristotle, so all the law and prophets (excluded from the lawyer's question) depend on these two commandments (v. 40). They are not only more fundamental to any other commandment as in Mk 12.31; this might restrict their centrality to the Torah. No, all the Scriptures, including the prophets, are subject to them. Such relativization of Scripture is radical indeed to one who is at pains to insist this Jesus came to fulfill the law and prophets (5.20). Perhaps we have here an explanation of what that means.

Jesus' teaching on this matter is so central for the Second Evangelist that he relates it twice, the second time by the scribe (vv. 32-33). We might have expected Matthew to give Jesus' initial response in terms of the 'Shema' rather than Mark (v. 29). Its presence gives what follows a supreme importance in that it is tied to God's integrity and Israel's acknowledging the covenant bond with him. Mark, of course, was not the first to subordinate cultic acts to higher priorities. Significant instances in the Old Testament abound (1 Sam. 15.22; Ps. 40; 51; Hos. 6.6-8). And Matthew elsewhere subordinates cultic observance to more fundamental matters such as justice, mercy and faith (23.23; see 9.12; 12.7). Yet it is Mark who relativizes the significance even of 'all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices' by means of the twofold command (vv. 32, 33). This is in keeping with the Evangelist's more extensive attack on Temple theology and cultus. He

alone reports in the previous chapter that Jesus in effect closed it down by refusing to permit traffic through it (11.16). Furthermore, only in Mark does Jesus cite Isa. 56.3-7 to remind the leadership that God intended to make the Temple a place of prayer for all nations, not simply the Jews (v. 17). Finally, the false witnesses at the Sanhedrin's hearing attribute a more negative attitude of Jesus towards the present Temple. There is no reference to its being the 'Temple of God' as in Mt. 26.61. Whereas Jesus in Matthew only claims power to destroy it, in Mark he promises to destroy it and build one without human effort (14.58). Thus, love for God and persons is not only basic to the revealed will of God in Scripture (Matthew), it is also fundamental to those rites and institutions designed to bring about atonement. To acknowledge this is to be near to the kingdom of God (v. 34).

Although Mark, in the last comment, makes the issue important for salvation in tying love to God's rule, it is Luke who makes the point explicit when the lawyer asks, 'teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' (10.25). As if he is aware that other Jewish teachers had formulated the double commandment along similar, if not identical, lines, the Third Evangelist has the lawyer answer (vv. 26-27) what in Matthew and Mark was attributed to Jesus. For Luke, the issue is not the law *per se* but eternal life. The law itself, as interpreted by this expert (not by Jesus) prescribes the condition via the twin command. Jesus' role lies in urging the lawyer to act on what is already known (v. 28), identifying one's neighbor and defining neighborliness with the parable of the Good Samaritan (vv. 30-37). In this story, a number of points are made. As if to counter merely attitudinal dimensions of neighborliness, Luke stresses behavior. It is doing that brings life (vv. 25, 28, 37). One *becomes* neighbor by *doing* mercy (v. 37).

At first glance, Jesus' teaching, even in Luke, does not advance over the Old Testament. In Lev. 19.34, the command is to love the stranger (non-Israelite) as oneself since the Israelites know what it meant to be strangers in Egypt. Yet, the parable of the Good Samaritan does take the point further, for here the stranger is not merely a Gentile, but a half-breed, religiously and ethnically, a historic *enemy* whose people once frustrated the attempts of returned Jewish captives to rebuild the Temple of God.

Apart from the Synoptic Evangelists, no one else in the New

Testament either cites the joint command to love or formulates it along similar lines. Paul, identifies only Lev. 19.18 as the single command by which 'the entire law is fulfilled' (Gal. 5.4). He makes the same point three times in Romans 13.8-10, using πληροῦν and ἀνακεφαλαιοῦσθαι in reference to the decalogue and 'any other commandment'. Even James joins Paul in this regard, describing Lev. 19.18 as the 'royal law' which one does well to keep perfectly (2.8). Striking here is that both Paul and James confine themselves to the second part of the joint command. While neither might have known the dual formulation in either its Jewish or evangelic versions, both knew the Shema. Yet they stress the *human* well-being towards which the entire Torah points. This is indeed a radicalization of biblical religion along the lines of Jesus' teaching about the sabbath and its being for human benefit, not the other way around (Mk 2.28). Yet it does not go to the root of the matter because the neighbor in view is one's Christian brother or sister. Jesus insists in Luke that one will inherit the life of the age (to come, ζῶῃ αἰώνιος) in showing mercy towards one's *enemy*. Making the Samaritan an example of neighborliness for the Jewish theologian is shocking enough. Later, Luke will relate how Samaritans could be saved by Jews who became Christians (Acts 12). But here he turns the tables completely by making a Samaritan a Jew's savior!

It is apparent that the redactional efforts of each Evangelist at this point have been quite consistent with their endeavors as a whole. Matthew here reaches a climax in his brief for Jewish Christians: the law which Jesus came to fulfill points throughout to the love of God and neighbor.

Mark's preoccupation with cultic matters in a Gospel destined to Gentile Christians in Rome may reflect a situation related by Paul and Luke (in Acts): that Gentile Christians were constantly pressed to perfect their salvation by adhering to the requirements of the Jewish cultus, especially circumcision and dietary scrupulosity. The latter's importance for Mark's readers may be the reason so much attention is given to it in 7.1-23 (more than by Matthew and Luke). Concern to recount Jesus' attitude towards the Temple would have enabled Gentile Christians to cope with its destruction in the war with Rome; love of God and neighbor will keep one near to the kingdom of God when the cultus and its central shrine are gone.

Luke continues here to insist upon the nature of appropriate

behavior and its 'objects' as an indispensable component of the Christian response to God (see his version of Jesus' teaching on love for enemies in 6.27-36//Mt. 5.38-48). It is as if he feels obliged to deal with misconceptions reflected in the previous pericope: Jesus' efforts to quell the disciples' enthusiasm over their successful and spectacular mission (vv. 17-20) and the proper response to their privileged experience of special, divine revelation (vv. 21-24). Might he be saying both here and in Acts that his readers, impressed by the church's spiritual elite or depressed by their absence, remember that mercy akin to God's and motivated by love is the standard for life now and in the age to come?

By thus taking a canonical view, one gets yet another vantage point for observing how central is the *theologoumenon* of love towards God and neighbor in the thought of the Synoptic Evangelists. However, its importance does not lie simply in their preserving this tradition unanimously. Rather, our approach revealed how the twofold command was adapted to conduct a thoroughgoing analysis of the pillars of religious life and thought. Matthew, that 'scribe instructed in the kingdom of God' who brings forth treasures old and new (13.52), knows that the love commands were not made for Scripture. Scripture was made for them. The Bible's role is distorted unless its main function lies in implementing these chief commandments. Mark relativizes all attempts to define the heart of religion in cultic terms. For Luke, the way of love protests against all exclusively subjective religious experience which insists, 'receive and enjoy'. Love says, 'do and live'.

Now it might seem that in thus making love supreme, the Evangelists have selected a preferred theme from a number of possible candidates: justice, mercy, grace, etc. How does one avoid the criticism leveled earlier against preferential treatment? One need not deny that the *Evangelists* on occasion practiced such selectivity and harmonization and reductionism as well. Our concern is that the interpreter eschew such a move lest it keep him or her from observing how they permitted the living voice to speak to their own day. By avoiding value judgments, one can then have access to the full range of paradigms from which to choose the one most appropriate to the modern context. In so doing, we stand a better chance of communicating the 'whole counsel of God' today.

Although this study must conclude, the larger task remains. Other types of double and triple parallels need to be examined and, of

course, the Fourth Gospel must be included. With careful selection, one could range over the representative theological and ethical themes of the entire Gospel canon. A number of tacks might be taken. So far as scope is concerned, we might conduct it on the microscopic level, studying the way several Evangelists appeal to the Old Testament, or a single saying or narrative unit could be examined as it is handled by them. Macroscopically, one could analyze a large theme common to the Synoptics and John, between whom there are fewer verbal similarities.

The choice of examples is important. Those differences which do not yield to harmonization, that is, where it is difficult to claim that the variations represent what Jesus said or did on other occasions, will enable one to make the point most sharply. Of course, not every variant can be explained by the redactional thrust of an Evangelist. This is where scholars have perhaps claimed or implied too much: that every bit of tradition was brought under the complete sway of the dominant theme(s). Nor are all variants suitable candidates for canonical study. Some may be merely stylistic improvements. Other changes are more substantial but unworthy in this regard. Instances of less-than-noble motives at work are attempts to enhance the disciples' reputation by omitting or altering criticism directed towards them (Mt. 8.26; Mk 4.40; Lk. 8.28). Sometimes the Evangelists try to soften the blow of awkward or damaging statements by or about Jesus (Mt. 13.55; Mk 6.3; Lk. 4.22).

Not all aspects of inter-Gospel relations will have equal significance. Considerations of date or order of writing may not be critical; nor are they firm, given the recent debate about redating. Accounting for literary relationships, whichever way they go, is more relevant for redactional studies than for canonical ones. Certainly, redaction criticism is important, but now it occupies a penultimate role.

Historical criticism is the most problematic of all because the degree of control reduces sharply as one delves behind the text. It is not even possible to appeal to any sort of consensus about results or methods. There is no full satisfaction in saying that the thrust of each issue considered above coheres in the main with the results even of the most skeptical historical study: that Jesus' message had profound economic and social implications and that he engaged in a far-reaching critique of contemporary attitudes towards law and cult by stressing their pro-human thrust and by relativizing all by the law of love. Furthermore,

even if the historical questions could be answered, the precise manner of their relation to Gospel texts and canon would need to be delineated. And there are some who will deny the legitimacy of including historical matters in the enterprise at all.

At this point New Testament scholars will have to be open to the involvement of theologians and philosophers, since the fundamental question of the nature and locus of authority for Christian theology and ethics must be answered, at least in broad terms. Perhaps the advent of canonical criticism will provide the stimulus for a discussion which desperately needs the full participation of all of the church's scholars and saints.