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# The Gospel Before The Gospels

KEVIN SMYTH

THE title of this paper, the Gospel before the gospels, was not meant to be mysterious, but it calls for some explanation. The gospels are the four books which present the words and deeds of Christ. Ancient tradition attributed them to two apostles, Matthew and John, and to two disciples of the apostles, Mark and Luke. Mark was always signalled as the interpreter of Peter. Luke was known as the companion and fellow-worker of Paul. According to most scholars, Catholic and non-Catholic, believers and unbelievers, the four gospels were published somewhere between A.D. 65 and 100. Even the few highly sceptical scholars who would give a slightly later date to Matthew and John would admit that the bulk of the material was a fixed quantum by the last part of the first century.

The Gospel which was there before the final literary fixation of these gospels, is the oral preaching of the apostles, that is, the message of salvation proclaimed by the immediate disciples of Christ when they confronted the world after his death and resurrection. This was about A.D. 30 in the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, under a provincial governor called Pontius Pilate. These data are assured by non-Christian as well as Christian records. That leaves an interval of thirty years and more between the Gospel, the first apostolic preaching, and the gospels, the documentary rendering of that message. The question naturally arises: how can one know whether in the interval between the event and the history, the oral message was subjected to alterations? Can we close the gap of nearly forty years? No one will ask for an assurance that the message has not undergone the inevitable minor variations which accompanied for instance its translation from one language to another. But has it at any rate remained substantially unchanged? To most students of ancient history an interval of forty years between event and record will not feel uncomfortable. Our two main sources for the reign of Tiberius, the Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius, are about seventy years from their subject. Forty years is the gap between ourselves and the 'Troubles' and the 'Treaty'. The ivy of legend may have already started to encumber the tree, but it cannot yet obscure the trunk. How can we confirm the general impression that serious books by sincere authors, written so soon after the event, must be taken as giving the main truth, at least, irrefragably?

Have we independent evidence for the stability of the tradition which was finally incorporated into the gospels?

There are two ways of getting behind the gospels. One is by an examination of the internal evidence of the books themselves. The Gospel before the gospels is of course contained in the gospels themselves, and the method of analysis called Form-Criticism in English and Formgeschichte in German enables us to trace back the history of the growth of tradition to its earliest stages, much as the basic cartoon of an Old Master could be traced by cleaning away carefully the various layers of pigmentation which built up the picture from the original drawing. This method, which has been highly developed in the last forty years, has been a valuable tool in gospel study. By insisting on the traditional character of the elements of which the final literary productions were composed, it has freed us from the idea that the four evangelists were giving the Christian world their own personal memoirs. They were, on the contrary, simply presenting the traditional church preaching from their own particular theological point of view, adapted to the precise needs of certain reading publics. Also, this view of the gospels as the deposit of tradition has rendered the question of the antiquity of each tradition much more important than the precise date of its literary fixation. Still, the method of Form-criticism presupposes a certain view of the general progress of the Christian preaching. Otherwise it would have no term of comparison, when it sets about placing an element of tradition in its living, social, religious background. We shall therefore confine ourselves in this paper to the development of the Christian preaching, as it shows itself before the gospels and independent of them, in the hope of showing that no substantial variation took place.

First, however, we may give some historical background to the gospels themselves. In A.D. 64, Rome was greatly damaged by a great fire, in which there was much loss of life. Of the fourteen districts of the city, only four escaped the fire. According to Tacitus, three of the ten burnt districts were levelled to the ground, and in the other seven only a few shells of houses survived. Then the reigning Emperor, Nero, undertook a great work of reconstruction, partly, says Tacitus, to provide himself with finer palaces, partly to carry out some badly-needed city-planning. The next thing was to seek some means of propitiating the gods, and much prayer, libation and sacrifice were offered. Tacitus then says: 'But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor and the propitiation of the gods could not banish from the minds of the people the sinister belief that the conflagration had been the result of the Emperor's own orders. Hence, to quench the rumour Nero fixed the guilt—and inflicted the most exquisite tortures—on a class universally hated for its abominations, called Christians by the people. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the

extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our governors, Pontius Pilate. The mischievous superstition, the worst yet known, was checked for the moment, but broke out again not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but in Rome itself. Accordingly, all those who pleaded guilty (to the name of Christian) were arrested. Then, on their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of burning the city, as of hatred against mankind. They died amid jeers and mockery. Some were wrapped in the skins of beasts and were then torn to pieces by dogs. Others were nailed to crosses, while some were kept for the stake, and when night fell were set on fire to serve as street-lamps.' (Annals, 15, 44.)

It was in the light of such candles that our earliest extant gospel, S. Mark's, was written. S. Peter had just died, a victim probably of Nero's campaign. During Peter's preaching, Mark had been at times his 'interpreter'. This probably means that Mark had repeated in a loud voice the preaching which Peter had pronounced softly before his congregation. This speaker and loud-speaker form of address was a synagogal custom, which Mark followed for the benefit of Peter's audiences. If we accept this account of Mark's relation to Peter and to Peter's hearers—and the account is very little later than the event—we already have good titles for the credibility of Mark's gospel. When Mark, soon after the martyrdom of Peter, gathered together the traditional themes of which Peter had discoursed, is it historically credible that he would have distorted them? Can one imagine the public which had heard the apostolic preaching accepting a version radically different from the living voice which they had venerated? *Mutatis mutandis*, the same is true for the other gospels. They were not read to untutored ears, but to Christians who had apostolic traditions—in their blood.

This general consideration may not be ignored, even by the sceptical historian. Nonetheless, by the last quarter of the first century, the words and deeds of Christ had been passed on mainly by word of mouth for some forty years. And all oral messages are likely to be subject to alteration. The gospels are not brief watch-words, human memory is not only fallible, but it can be imaginative. Not all critics will look on Peter and his companions as responsible agents. What had happened the message before Mark wrote down his version of Peter's preaching? Further, though no one doubts that the Church accepted and approved of the gospels, it will be said that the Church was too ready to welcome anything which confirmed its faith and gave it assurance in face of a hostile world. How many lives of saints have been received eagerly and uncritically by good fervent Christians, who did not ask themselves

were they only reading pious legends, but were only too glad to have something comforting in their hands. The rise and fall of St Philomena is fresh in our minds. A doubtful name on the broken lid of a tomb, St Philomena rose to the heights of a three-volume biography, written no doubt in sincere devotion, but all imagination. She is now only the shadow of an uncomfortable memory. May not the same devotional process have been at work during the tradition which gave rise to the gospels?

Finally, both believer and unbeliever recognize that the gospels are the echo of the preaching Church. Here 'preaching' is an important word. Everything which was repeated about the words and deeds of Christ was recalled by a preacher, that is, by a man who was working hard to adapt what he had to say to the needs of the audience. Sometimes that meant no more than translating the original Aramaic into Greek. Sometimes however a straightforward translation was too obscure, or even possibly misleading, and the preachers put it into clearer, but freer terms. Interpretation was added to tradition. For instance, we read in Luke 14:26 Christ's saying, 'If any man comes to me and does not hate father and mother, he cannot be my disciple'. But Matthew 10:37 reads, 'He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me'. The startling word 'hate' thus received a preacher's commentary, which was built into the tradition. While Catholics recognize the right of the apostolic preaching to present the words and deeds of Christ not neat, so to speak, but filtered by the authoritative voice of apostles (assisted by the Holy Spirit), unbelievers may claim that this process went beyond the bounds admissible by historians. We must therefore try to show that the variations in the ancient tradition were confined to strict limits, and were not additions, but homogeneous expressions of the original.

Briefly, we must first state that the time-interval is too short to allow of radical changes. And here we may remind ourselves of how the gospels are dated. Three lines of enquiry bring us to the traditional dates. One is the mass of literary reference to them from the early part of the second century onwards, universal in churches as far apart as Gaul, Asia Minor, Alexandria, Rome and Africa by the middle of the second century. For instance, Justin, a Palestinian convert of A.D. 135, notes in his first Apologia that the 'records of the Apostles, called gospels' were being read every Sunday in the liturgy. Another line of enquiry examines the picture which the gospels give of their first recipients. The fourth gospel reflects the religious philosophy and the debates of the Hellenistic world of incipient Gnosticism, about A.D. 100. But the first three reflect a much more archaic set of interests. The

opposition sentiment is embodied in Jewish scribes and Pharisees, hence the composition of these gospels must go back to a stage well beyond the fourth, when such adversaries still had relevance. But the third line of enquiry seems to many people more palpable. This is the manuscript authority. In the John Rylands Museum at Manchester there is a small fragment from the fourth gospel, which comes from a copy circulating in Egypt perhaps as early as A.D. 120. The original publication must have been much earlier, in all probability, since it took place at Ephesus. We must therefore put the fourth gospel at its traditional date, about 100, and the three others, and obviously older, also at their traditional dates. The number of translations, quotations and manuscripts of the gospels before 200 A.D. force the acceptance of the traditional dating.

With the gospels thus anchored in the last quarter of the first century we may turn to the set of documents which provide us with a picture of the apostolic tradition at an earlier date. The great epistles of Paul were written between A.D. 50 and 60 and preserved by his foundation churches, where all pseudo-epistles were ruled out by the public character of the documents. These epistles, to the Thessalonians, the Galatians, the Corinthians and the Romans, are primarily theological treatises, with disciplinary or moral instruction. Paul did not set out, like the evangelists, to give any sort of complete account of the words and deeds of Christ. But by way of allusion or pre-supposition, and expressly when occasion offers, he tells us a good deal about the apostolic tradition as it was in the fifties. His testimony is of supreme historical value, on account of his personal quality, his personal history and his personal contacts.

First, as to his quality. Paul of Tarsus appears in his letters, which are among the greatest personal documents of all literature, as a profound and critical thinker, and a man of religious zeal and integrity. As a writer, he ranks with Plato, Augustine or Dante. Good judges have held that only in Plato does Greek writing rise to such lyrical heights as in Paul. His thought is so rich and subtle that it has nourished Christian thinking since it was first put forward—not to mention those it has baffled, as the second epistle of Peter already complained. A great writer and thinker, he was also a great saint, who put the seal of the final sacrifice on his utterances. The testimony of such a man cannot be taken lightly.

Secondly, his personal history. Paul grew up a strict Pharisee, out-doing his contemporary Jews in his zeal for the Law. So much so that, as he himself confesses, he persecuted the Church of God for having broken with that Law. He came into the Church, persuaded, we may be sure, by no half-hearted or brittle arguments. He at least was not

avidly credulous. No wishful thinking led him to welcome pious fictions. And most important, he had never known Christ personally. And therefore he at least cannot be under suspicion of having fallen under the spell of Christ's personality. We can easily think of lieutenants of great men, so hypnotized by the dominance of their leaders that they can see no fault in them and have memories only of their leader's brilliance. Even here, of course, total scepticism with regard to their testimony would be irresponsible. But on the whole, we distrust hero-worshippers and maintain a certain reserve. But Paul came from ignorance of Christ, from hostility to his followers and prejudice against his doctrine, to give testimony to Christ. A man convinced against his will is not always of the same opinion still. And he can be a witness of the first quality.

Thirdly, his contacts. Paul was converted within a few years, at most, of Pentecost. He was baptized and given detailed instruction by personal disciples of Christ. Then, as he himself relates, he went up to Jerusalem, to pay a visit of respect to Peter the chief of the apostles, and stayed with him for a fortnight, seeing hardly anyone else. Fourteen years later, he went up again to Jerusalem, to lay his gospel before the pillars of the Church, Peter, James and John, this James being Christ's own cousin. We have not to guess what Paul spoke to Peter about for a fortnight. Paul was a man of one interest only, Christ.

Here is part of the apostolic tradition as rendered by Paul. Jesus was a Jew, of the line of David (Romans 1:3; 9:5), who submitted to the law of Moses (Galatians 4:4). He led the life of a poor man (2 Corinthians 8:9), preached to the Jewish people (R 15:8), fulfilled the Messianic promises of the Old Testament (2 Cor 1:20 R 15:8), chose twelve apostles of whom Peter was the chief (1 C 9:1; 15:5 G 1; 2), whose function was to be witnesses to the resurrection (1 C 9:1) and supervise the tradition (G 1;2). He instituted the Eucharist (1 C 11:23ff) and thereby the Church as a cultic institution, which is also the place of the Holy Spirit (1 C 12. R 8 etc.). Jesus died for our sins, crucified, at the Pasch, was buried, rose from the dead and appeared to the apostles and disciples (1 C 15:3-8; 5:7, R 6:4)—last of all, to Paul himself. Christ will come again in splendour (1 C 1:8), to sit in judgment (2 C 5:10) on Jews and gentiles (R 2:16). The coincidence of this tradition with that of the gospels is clear.

Paul, again by allusion, not often by direct quotation, shows that he knows the tradition which transmitted the words of Christ, basically as we know them from the later gospels. Here are some of the evangelical sayings echoed in Paul:

'Be not solicitous for the morrow' (Matthew 6:23, see Philippians 3:6)  
 'Bless those that curse you' (Mt 5:44—R 12:14.17.21; 1 C 4:12)

'He that divorces his wife commits adultery' (Mt 5:32—1 C 7:10f)  
 'There are some that renounce marriage for the kingdom of God' (Mt 19:11f—1 C 7:7).

'Eat and drink what is set before you, for the labourer is worthy of his hire' (Luke 10:7f—1 C 9:14; 10:27).

'If you have faith, you will say to this mountain, move hence and it shall be moved' (Mt 17:20; 21:12—1 C 13:2)

'You shall love your neighbour as yourself . . . this is the law and the prophets' (Mt 19:19; 22:37—40—R 13:9f).

'This is my body, which is for you. . . . This is my blood, which is shed for you' etc. (Mt 26:26ff—1 C 11:23ff).

'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's' (Mt 22:21—R 13:7)

'There are some of those standing by who will not taste death until they have seen the Son of Man coming in his kingdom' (Mt 16:28—1 Thessalonians 4:15).

'The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all scandals. . . . The just will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father' (Mt 13:41ff)—1 C 15:24ff).

'Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom' (Mt 25:34—R 14:17 G 5:21 1 C 6:9).

'Where there are two or three gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Mt 18:20—1 C 7:3-5).

'The scribes and Pharisees teach but do not act' (Mt 23:3—R 2:17ff).

Finally, 'Paul had a definite conception of the character of Jesus. Not only does he emphasize his righteousness and obedience, 2 C 5:20 Ph 2:8, but he notes as his outstanding traits: gentleness, forbearance, humility, and a complete absence of self-seeking (2 C 10:1 Ph 2:7ff R 15:2f 1 C 11:1 1 Th 1:6). These traits are expressly held up for the imitation of Christians. It is the Jesus of history, for he is an object of imitation in the same sense that Paul himself is. Moreover, after Paul in Romans 12 and 13 has set forth the Christian moral ideal in some detail, he sums up in the words, "Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ"' (C. H. Dodd).

Thus the picture of Christ, which we can ascertain as extant in the fifties, corresponds substantially and in many particulars with the gospels of the seventies. No one would maintain that the evangelists drew on the epistles. Therefore we have the same gospel, but before the gospels, from an independent source. Can we now go further back, behind the epistles, to the general preaching as it was in what we may call the pre-Pauline era, between A.D. 30 and 50?



The earliest extant Christian document, the first epistle to the Thessalonians, is from shortly after 50. Before that, the primitive apostolic tradition may be reconstructed only by a process of literary analysis carried out on the epistles of Paul, and on a still later document, the Acts of the Apostles. This analysis uses in the main the following tools:

St Paul wrote his longest and most important epistle to the Roman church, a church which he had not visited at the time. It must have been long in existence when he wrote, about 60, because under Nero's persecution it was a considerable and well-known body—even if we do not take Tacitus' *ingens multitudo* too literally. If then we find that Paul can take certain traditions for granted, if he does not so much assert as comment on them, we know that such traditions must have been part of the common apostolic preaching before Paul's letters. Of some matters Paul expressly says that they were common property, as when he introduces a subject with the words, 'Now we know' or the like, R 3:19. 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ were baptized into his death?' R 6:3. This 'common knowledge' is the first criterion of pre-Pauline tradition.

Another hall-mark of antiquity is where language foreign to Paul occurs—and in stylized or poetical formulae which stand out clearly from his own very personal style. One instance of such non-Pauline language and form is the hymn which is embedded in the epistle to the Philippians, a liturgical hymn to Christ which runs: 'Being in the form of God, He thought it no robbery, To be equal to God. But he emptied himself, Took the form of a slave, Bearing human likeness. Revealed in human shape, He humbled himself, Obedient even unto death (the death of the cross). Therefore God exalted him, And bestowed on him the Name Which is above all names: That in the name of Jesus Every knee should bend In heaven, on earth and in hell: And every tongue confess That Jesus is Lord To the glory of God the Father'. The bracketed words, 'the death of the cross', are Paul's own style, and seem to be his personal comment.

In such passages we find, further, theological interests which are outside the ordinary bent of Paul's mind. For instance, in the recitative formula of Romans 10:9—'If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord: And believe with your hearts that God raised him from the dead, You shall be saved'. Here the resurrection appears as the foundation of faith. That is not the 'Pauline' approach, because he writes not to prove the foundations of faith, but to expound the faith. Hence he ordinarily speaks of the Resurrection, not as proof of Christ's mission—

which he takes for granted it is—but as proof of a consequent doctrine: the general resurrection of the dead. Finally, we find certain themes, rare in Paul, which occur constantly in ancient Christian writings which are independent of him. With these four criteria—language, formulation, theological interests, recurrence—we can reconstruct a fair picture of the apostolic preaching before the fifties of the century.

Here is the main outline of what we learn, in the words found in Paul, but not, so to speak, his own:

Christ 'was promised beforehand by God's prophets in the holy scriptures; the gospel concerns his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, and manifested as Son of God in power, through the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead' (R 1:2-4). We have 'redemption in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to show God's justice' (R 3:25). What we know as the Apostles' Creed is echoed in Romans 10:6ff, 'Do not say to yourselves, Who will ascend into heaven? that is, to bring Christ down; or, Who will descend into the abyss? that is, to bring Christ up from the dead'. Behind this is the Creed's 'He descended into hell . . . and ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God'. And it is precisely in the 'common knowledge letter', the epistle to the Romans, that we find quoted, 'Sits at the right hand of God', R 8:34—the only place in Paul's letters. The ancient tradition is manifest, as it is in the baptism reference, already noted, and the Incarnation-hymn in Philippians. Before we complete the outline, from two places where Paul expressly refers to the earlier apostolic tradition, we may look at another source, the Acts of the Apostles.

The Acts is later than the epistles, and no earlier than the gospels. But in the first part, the Acts gives what purport to be the first sermons of Peter and Paul, from the earliest years of the Church. To prove that we really have here ancient recollections, fossils from antiquity, so to speak, and not ideal speeches composed for the occasion by the author of Acts—as many critics hold—we have the same hall-marks as for the ancient tradition in Paul's epistles. These speeches do not use the ordinary Christian language of the last quarter of the century. They use antiquated terms, and even a grammar which seems to go back to the Aramaic of Jerusalem, but which the author of Acts could not have invented. One example of the archaic language must suffice: the titles of Christ. He is called the Holy One, the Elect One, the Just One, the Servant of the Lord. These are messianic Old Testament titles, but soon went out of use among Christians. They survive elsewhere only in some liturgical documents, which are notoriously conservative.

It has been objected that the author of Acts deliberately gave the speeches the desired patina of antiquity, by drawing for instance on the liturgy, and not on ordinary Christian usage. If so, he must have been as alert to atmosphere, and as supple and varied in style for each occasion, as a James Joyce. It is hard to believe he had such an ear for words. We may therefore take it that the speeches in the first part of Acts are fair representations of the early preaching.

We see there the same basic elements of the apostolic gospel which we have found behind Paul, and which recur later in the gospels: that the age of fulfilment, foretold by the prophets, has come. Christ has fulfilled the promises by his ministry, death and resurrection. He has been exalted to the right hand of God. The Holy Spirit is working in the Church. The sacramental work of the Church is the remission of sins, by baptism. The messianic age will be consummated at the return of Christ.

But these bare outlines can be filled out, in two instances of major importance, with the actual words of the Gospel before the gospels. They are preserved, inside quotation marks, in the first epistle to the Corinthians. One is Paul saying, 'This I received from the Lord, which I handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed, took bread and gave thanks, broke it and said, This is my body, which is for you. In the same way also the chalice, after supper, saying, 'This chalice is the new testament in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me' 11:23ff. The other is Paul saying, 'I handed on to you what I myself received, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the Twelve, then to more than five hundred brethren at once, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles', 15:3-7.

These are from the first depositions, the earliest and most solemn testimony—'from the Lord'. They are not the whole of our gospels, but they are random samples: the gospels are fuller, but they are no different, and they add basically nothing new to this and the rest of the apostolic preaching as reconstructed from Paul.

This does not mean that the objections quoted earlier to the value of gospel tradition can be wholly resolved by the merely historical method. The outline of the first Gospel preaching remains an outline. With such considerations as given above, we cannot exclude all variations in the final reporting of the words and deeds of Jesus. But we

can be certain that any variation remained within strict and ascertainable limits. Nor does our proof absolutely exclude the possibility that the final stage incorporated secondary embellishments. But it does ensure that no additions are out of character, and that they have not changed the substantial testimony. Finally, the nature of the tradition is such that preachers' comment and interpretation—so far from being excluded—must be reckoned with. The gospels, and the tradition which they crystallize, are not merely neutral records: they are expressions of a faith which seeks to be winning and even compelling. By the nature of the records, some details must remain always outside the scope of sheer historical proof. The religious authority of the gospels as a whole will depend on their inspiration, that is, the Church teaching that they were produced under the special action of the Holy Spirit. But the fundamental challenge is historically the same as was put forward by the apostles in the first days of the Church. That the Church has the right to speak for Christ, that Christ has the right to speak for the Father, by virtue of his resurrection: with this Gospel the apostles met the world once, and this Gospel they handed on unimpaired, as the gospels also testify.

*This article gives the main text of a public lecture, in a series of theological lectures at Milltown Park, Dublin, 1961. It is here published as a sample of the questions and answers which a new interest in the rational foundations and explanations of the faith has called forth in Ireland today.*