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CHAPTER XIV

Revelation and Tradition in Paul

G. E. Ladd

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The Kerygma or proclamation of the apostles and preachers of New Testament times confronts us with a difficult problem in understanding the relationship between tradition and revelation. This *kerygma* consisted primarily of the heralding of certain recent events in history: Jesus' death and resurrection. It included, along with the events themselves, the proclamation of the redemptive meaning of these events. At the same time, Paul claims that the *kerygma* is a revelation from God, purposed through all ages, but now disclosed to men through the apostles and prophets (Rom. 16:25-26; Eph. 3:5). Reflection on these statements could easily lead to the conclusion that revelation is concerned only with the redemptive meaning of these historical events, not with the events themselves. This could, in turn, lead logically to the further conclusion that revelation did not take place in past historical events, but only in the proclamation of the meaning of these events, i.e., in the preaching of the gospel. Only in the proclamation of the word does God confront man and reveal himself.

This conclusion has been drawn by modern existentialist theologians who see the event of revelation and salvation as "nowhere present except in the proclaiming, accosting, demanding, and promising word of preaching".¹ In Bultmann's view this salvation occurrence took place in the proclaimed word of the apostles, and continues to take place in the word as it is proclaimed today. From this point of view, the gospel is not the recital of past events; it is a present event. Revelation is not the disclosure of truths about God, the communication of knowledge; revelation is the confrontation with God which occurs in the proclaimed word.²

This view finds apparent support in the fact that there are sayings in Paul in which revelation seems to occur in the *kerygma* (preaching) and in the *euangelion* (gospel) rather than in past events. Romans 16:25-26 appears to equate the gospel and the *kerygma* of Jesus Christ with the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages but now disclosed and made known to all nations. Furthermore, the gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). The gospel itself is "mystery" (Eph. 6:19), i.e., a secret

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purpose of God now made known to men. The gospel is not only of divine origin;³ it is a divine activity performed for the benefit of men.⁴ The gospel does not merely bear witness to salvation history; it is itself salvation history,⁵ for it is only in the preaching of the gospel that

¹ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York, 1951), I, p. 302.

² R. Bultmann, "Revelation in the NT," *Existence and Faith*, S. M. Ogden ed. (New York, 1960), pp. 58 ff.

³ Rom. 1:1, 1 Thes. 2:2. "The gospel of God" is subjective genitive.

⁴ O. Piper, "Gospel", *IDB*, II, p. 414.

⁵ G. Friedrich, *TDNT*, II, p. 731.

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salvation is accomplished. Bultmann is right, therefore, when he underlines the "existential" character of the gospel.⁶

However, the *kerygma* and the gospel cannot be limited to the activity of preaching; they designate also the message itself, the *content* of preaching. God's purpose to save men through the "foolishness of preaching" (1 Cor. 1:21, AV) does not refer to the activity but the content of preaching⁷, and this content is "Christ crucified" — an event in history which is offensive and foolishness to all but believers (1 Cor. 1:23). Thus the gospel includes the proclamation of facts in history: the death of Christ, his resurrection, his appearances to his disciples (1 Cor. 15:3 ff.).⁸ However, it is not the proclamation of mere events, but of events meaningfully understood. Christ died *for our sins*. The gospel is both historical event and meaning; and the meaning of the event is that God was acting in history for man's salvation. The historical facts must be interpreted to be understood for what they are: the redeeming, revealing act of God; and in the gospel, this redemptive event is proclaimed.

There exists a dynamic unity between the event and the proclamation of the event, for the proclamation is itself a part of the event. It is impossible to place primary emphasis upon events as past history, or as present proclamation; the two are inseparably bound together, for two reasons. Apart from proclamation (*kerygma, euangelion*), the events in history cannot be understood for what they are: the redeeming acts of God. Furthermore, apart from proclamation, the events are mere events in past history; but in proclamation, they become present redeeming events. The past lives in the present through proclamation. This is why Paul can speak of the gospel as itself the power of God unto salvation.

This tension between the past and the present is confirmed by the concept of tradition in Paul.⁹ Paul frequently refers to his preaching and

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teaching in the same terms which are used of the Jewish oral traditions: to deliver (παράδιδοναι) and to receive (παραλαμβάνειν) tradition (παράδοσις). Jesus had contrasted the Jewish traditions with the word of God (Matt. 15:6 and forbade his disciples to imitate the rabbis (Matt. 23:8-10), and yet Paul commends the Corinthians for maintaining the traditions which he had delivered to them (1 Cor. 11:2) and exhorts the Thessalonians to hold to the traditions which they had been taught (2 Thess. 2:15) and to shun those who ignored the tradition they had received from him (2 Thess. 3:6). This idiom establishes a distinct similarity between Jewish rabbinic tradition and Christian tradition; for the terms are the same,¹⁰ and they are used at times quite synonymously with preaching the gospel. The

⁶ O. Piper, *loc. cit.*

⁷ See G. Friedrich, *TDNT*, III, p. 716; C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching* (London, 1936), p.3 ; C. T. Craig, *IB*, 10, p.30; F. W. Grosheide, *First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, 1953), p. 47.

⁸ Bultmann's one-sided emphasis upon the *kerygma* as proclamation and not content requires him arbitrarily to exclude 1 Cor. 15:3-8 from the *kerygma*. See *Kerygma and Myth*, H. W. Bartsch, ed.. (New York, 1953) I, p. 112.

⁹ For literature, see A. M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors*² (London, 1961), ch. 2 Oscar Cullmann, "The Tradition", in *The Early Church*, A. J. B. Higgins ed. (London, 1956), ch. 4. B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript* (Uppsala, 1961), pp. 288-321; H. N. Ridderbos, *Paul and Jesus* (Philadelphia, 1958), pp. 46-53; L. Goppelt, "Tradition nach Paulus", *KD*, 4 (1958), pp.213-33; R. P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (Philadelphia, 1962), Ch. II. [Cf. also P. Fannon, "The Influence of Tradition in St. Paul." *Studia Evangelica* IV (TU 102, Berlin, 1968) pp. 292-307. Edd.].

¹⁰ See O. Cullmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 63 ff.

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Corinthians received the gospel (παρελάβετε) which Paul had preached to them (1 Cor. 15:1). The gospel which the Galatians received (παρελάβετε) is normative; there can be no other gospel (Gal. 1:9). The Thessalonians received (παραλαβόντες) as the word of God the message which they heard from Paul, recognizing in Paul's words something more than human tradition — the word of God itself (1 Thess. 2:13). In all of these passages, the idiom reflects the handing on and receiving of an oral tradition with a fixed content.

This tradition embodied the apostolic *kerygma* or *euangelion*. Paul delivered (παρέδωκα) to the Corinthians the gospel which he also received (παρέλαβον), that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he rose on the third day, that he appeared to his disciples (1 Cor. 15:1-5). It is¹¹ generally accepted that verses 3b-5 embody a primitive piece of pre-Pauline *kerygma* which Paul has received as a tradition from those who were apostles before him.¹²

The same idiom of oral tradition appears in connexion with the preservation of a piece of tradition from Jesus' life, viz., the Lord's Supper. Paul received "from the Lord" the account which he delivered to the Corinthians of the institution of the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11:23). Some scholars understand the expression "from the Lord" to mean that Paul received his knowledge of the Lord's Supper by direct illumination from the exalted Lord, as he received knowledge that Jesus was the Messiah on the Damascus road.¹³ However, in view of the language and the content of the tradition, this is highly unlikely. Most commentators think Paul means to assert that this tradition which he received from other apostles had its historical origin with Jesus. Paul says he received ἀπό, not παρά the Lord. The latter would suggest reception directly from the Lord, whereas the

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former indicates ultimate source.¹⁴ In any case, the words mean at least this: that the chain of historical tradition which Paul received goes back unbroken to the words of Jesus himself.¹⁵ Thus Paul includes two things in the tradition handed down orally from earlier apostles: the good news of salvation in Christ, and at least one piece of tradition from Jesus' life which found its way also into the gospels.

While the oral gospel tradition is in some ways similar to Jewish oral tradition, in one all-important respect it is quite different. To receive the gospel tradition does not mean merely to accept the truthfulness of a report about certain historical facts, nor does it mean simply to receive instruction and intellectual enlightenment. To receive the tradition means to receive (παρελάβετε) Christ Jesus as Lord (Col. 2:6). In the voice of the tradition, the voice of God himself is heard; and through this word, God himself is present and active in the church (1 Thes. 2:13). Thus the Christian tradition is not mere instruction passed on like Jewish oral tradition from one teacher to another. The tradition handed on is in the form of preaching (εὐηγγελισάμην, 1 Cor. 15:1), and the reception of the message involves a response of faith (ἐπιστεύσατε, 1 Cor. 15:2). The tradition about the resurrection of Jesus must be believed in

¹¹ Probably the appearances mentioned in vv. 6-8 were added by Paul to the tradition he received.

¹² See J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 129-130.

¹³ See F. Godet, *First Corinthians* (Edinburgh, 1890) II, p. 149. C. T. Craig thinks Paul may be asserting that his interpretation of the Lord's Supper was received from the risen Lord (*IB*, 10, p. 136).

¹⁴ See J. Héring, *First Corinthians* (London, 1962), pp. 114 f.; F. W. Grosheide, *First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, 1953), p. 269.

¹⁵ J. Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

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the heart and confessed with the mouth (Rom. 10:8, 9), and issues in salvation. Such confession is possible only through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3).

Thus the tradition has a two-fold character: it is *both* historical tradition *and* kerygmatic-pneumatic tradition at one and the same time. It is historical because it is tied to events in history and the tradition preserves the report of these events. It is kerygmatic because it can be perpetuated only as kerygma and received as a confession of faith. It is pneumatic because it can be received and preserved only by the enabling of the Spirit.¹⁶

A recognition of the kerygmatic-pneumatic character of the tradition provides the background for understanding Paul's statement that he received the tradition of the Lord's Supper "from the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:23). The "Lord" designates the Jesus of history who is now the exalted Lord. The tradition had its origin with Jesus himself; but as the exalted Lord, Christ now stands behind the tradition and speaks to the church through it. The tradition which Paul received from men both comes from Jesus and is also the word of the exalted Lord to Paul. The tradition of the Lord's Supper also bears the dual character of being both historical and pneumatic at the same time.¹⁷

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The kerygmatic-pneumatic character of the tradition is reflected most vividly in the fact that although it is the words of men mediated through the act of preaching, it is also the word of God (1 Thes. 2:13). This word of God, which is received as tradition, is also the gospel (Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5), the *kerygma* (1 Cor. 1:18, 21), the mystery (Col. 1:25), which is proclaimed not only by the apostles but sounded forth from the churches unto all the surrounding region (1 Thess. 1:8). While it is a word which can be taught and learned (Gal 6:6), it is also a divine trust committed to men (2 Cor. 5:19). While it is dependent upon human utterance for its propagation (Phil. 1:14), it is God's word which cannot be fettered (2 Tim. 2:9) and must speed on to triumph (2 Thess. 3:1). The word of God is a word about a crucifixion (1 Cor. 1:18); but the cross seen not as an isolated event in history but understood as the disclosure of the age-long redemptive purpose of God (Col. 1:25-6). The word is the subject of preaching, (2 Tim. 2:19) which is to be received by its hearers (1 Thess. 1:6) and to indwell them (Col. 3:16), bringing salvation (Eph. 1:13; Phil. 2:16).

Neither the historical nor the kerygmatic aspects of the word of God can be emphasized to the neglect of the other. Existentialist theologians emphasize the kerygmatic aspect of the word at the expense of its historical dimension, and the redemptive event becomes God's acting in the *kerygma*, not in events in history. Bultmann recognizes that the historical Jesus is the origin of the word of God, but he says, "we must speak of God as acting only in the sense that he acts with me here and now."¹⁸ This is contrary to the New Testament, which sees the acting of God to have occurred in the historical Jesus. However, the gospel is both past event and

¹⁶ This has been best expounded by L. Goppelt, *op. cit.*, pp. 216-17.

¹⁷ L. Goppelt, *op. cit.*, p. 223. Cullmann finds even more in this passage. He believes that for Paul, the exalted Lord is both the author and the content of the tradition, and that the Lord and tradition are practically identical. "There can be only one legitimate tradition, that which is transmitted by the apostles, and is designated as *Kyrios*" (O. Cullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 75). This appears to go further than the evidence allows. It has, however, been accepted by A. M. Hunter. See *Paul and His Predecessors* (London, 1961), p. 118.

¹⁸ R. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York, 1958), p. 78. See G. E. Ladd, "What does Bultmann Understand by the Acts of God?" *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 5 (1962), pp. 91-97.

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present proclamation. When the kerygmatic aspect is neglected, the kerygma becomes a recital of facts and events lying in the past and thereby loses its character as salvation event. Both aspects must be retained. "Since the revelation occurred in history, the gospel involves a report of historical events, yet the proclamation of the gospel is itself a powerful event."¹⁹

As the word of God, the gospel is indeed a divine communication; and it includes facts, truths, doctrines. However, if the gospel does no more than communicate facts and doctrines, it has been reduced to the level of human tradition. In the word, God communicates not only facts about redemption and truths about himself; God communicates himself, salvation, eternal life. The word of God is both the report about a redemptive

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event, and is itself a redemptive event, for in the word of the cross, the Crucified himself confronts men to communicate to them the benefits of his redeeming death.

We may now draw certain conclusions about the Pauline concept of revelation. The focus of revelation is Jesus Christ. In the event in history of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and exaltation, God has revealed himself redemptively to men. The revelation which occurred in the cross and resurrection is not complete; there yet awaits the revelation of the glory and salvation (Rom. 13:11) of God at the Parousia of Christ, when faith will be exchanged for sight and we shall see face to face (2 Cor. 5:7; 1 Cor. 13:12). Both the redemptive meaning of what God had done in the cross and resurrection, and the disclosure of what God will yet do at the consummation (1 Cor. 3:10) is revealed in the *kerygma*, the gospel, the word of God which exists in the form of a historical kerygmatic-pneumatic tradition. This tradition is a complex of several streams including traditions from the life of Jesus (1 Cor. 11:23), a summary of the Christian message expressed as a formula of faith and uniting facts of the life of Jesus and their theological interpretation (1 Cor. 15:3 f.), and also regulations or rules for practical Christian conduct (1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 3:6).²⁰ The tradition had its origin with Jesus himself (1 Cor. 11:23) and with the apostolic eye-witnesses (1 Cor. 15:1 ff., 8). Among the primary apostolic functions is not only the propagation of the tradition, but also its preservation from corruption with human traditions (Col. 2:8), and from distortion by false apostles who preach a Jesus who is different from the Jesus of the apostolic tradition (2 Cor. 11:3-5). The tradition is both a fixed and growing tradition; that is, the tradition cannot be changed, but it can be enlarged. That the gospel embodies a core of fixed tradition committed to the apostles is the explanation for Paul's passionate rejection of any message which diverges from the accepted tradition, even if it is propagated by an apostle himself (Gal. 1:8-9). On the other hand, the Spirit can add to the tradition by granting through the apostles and prophets an unfolding and outworking of the redemptive purpose of God which is already implicit in the redemptive work of Christ. This is seen in Paul's use of the term, *μυστήριον*, or revealed secret. The "mystery" is the total meaning of God's redemptive purpose which he has accomplished in Christ (Rom. 16:25-26). Particular disclosures of God's secret purpose revealed through the apostles include the fact of Christ as the embodiment of all wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:2), the indwelling of Christ in the hearts of his people (Col. 1:27), the abolishing of the distinction between Jew and Gentile in the body of Christ, the church (Eph.

¹⁹ William Baird, "What is the Kerygma?" *JBL* 76 (1957), p. 191. Baird studies the historical and the kerygmatic aspects of the gospel in C. H. Dodd and R. Bultmann and concludes that the Pauline gospel includes both.

²⁰ See O. Cullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

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3:3-6), the intimacy established between Christ and his church (Eph. 6:19), the present rejection of the gospel by Israel, the salvation of the Gentiles, which will lead to the future salvation of Israel (Rom. 11:25-26), the translation of living saints into

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resurrection life at the Parousia (1 Cor. 15:51), and the final restoration of divine order in Christ to a disordered universe (Eph. 1:9-10). While all of these facets of the mystery of God's redemptive purpose embody new understandings and disclosures, they are all implicit in what God has done in the death, resurrection and exaltation of Christ. Revelation is thus seen as an event which includes both deeds and words. The meaning of the events in history and their implications for Christian life are given in a historical tradition through which the exalted Christ himself speaks, and in direct disclosures by the Holy Spirit through the apostles and prophets.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul seems to reject the role of tradition in revelation and to claim that revelation occurs only by direct illumination by the Holy Spirit. He appears to declare his complete independence from the Primitive Church. He asserts that he did not receive his gospel from men, that it did not come to him by tradition (παρέλαβον) nor by instruction, but by direct revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:12). He declares his independence from the Jerusalem apostles. After his conversion, he did not go up to Jerusalem to receive the approval of the apostles but withdrew to Arabia. When he did go to Jerusalem three years later, it was not to establish an abiding relationship, but only to make a short visit to get acquainted with Peter and James (Gal. 1:17-19). Taken out of context, the assertions in this passage seem to contradict the statements of 1 Corinthians 11 and 15 that Paul handed on what he had received by tradition.

Various solutions to this apparent contradiction have been offered. Some have suggested that in Corinthians Paul refers only to the facts about Jesus which he learned from other Christians, while the meaning of these facts, i.e., their true interpretation came to him not from men but only by the direct revelation of the exalted Lord.²¹ This is, of course, true. Unquestionably, as Machen points out, Paul was familiar with many of the facts about Jesus' life and death, as well as the Christian claims for him as the Messiah, when he was still in Judaism. In fact, it was his Jewish understanding of the facts that made Saul a persecutor; what he gained on the Damascus Road was a new and correct understanding of the facts, viz., that Jesus was the Messiah. However, the tradition in 1 Corinthians 15 includes interpretation: "Christ died *for our sins*"; and it includes also a fact which undoubtedly Paul as a Jew did not accept, viz., that Jesus was raised from the dead and appeared to his disciples.

Others have maintained that Paul received the form of his proclamation from men but its essential content he received not from men but from the Lord. In its form, the Pauline *kerygma* was essentially the same as the tradition of the Jerusalem church; but in its essential dynamic nature, his gospel could not be transmitted by men but only communicated by direct revelation.²² This solution is not satisfactory, for it contradicts the kerygmatic

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²¹ J. G. Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (New York, 1928), pp. 144 ff.

²² William Baird, "What is the Kerygma?" *JBL* (1957), pp. 190 f.

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nature of the tradition and views it as though it were only a human tradition.

The apparent contradiction is due to the different purposes involved in the two passages. In Corinthians, Paul is thinking of particular aspects of the substance of his gospel: the Lord's Supper, the saving death, the resurrection and the appearances of Jesus. These include both facts and at least something of the meaning of the facts. In the substance of his gospel, Paul stands in agreement with earlier Christians, and indeed, he received information from them as to the gospel itself. However, in Galatians, Paul is dealing with his apostolic authority and with the one central fact of the gospel, viz., that Jesus was the resurrected and exalted Messiah. This he did not learn from other men, even though it was later corroborated by what he did learn from them. Paul was not converted by Christian preaching but by an immediate confrontation by the exalted Christ.²³ Neither did Paul receive his apostolic office from men. Both — his gospel and his apostolic office — came to him directly from the Lord, unmediated by men. The fact that subsequent to his conversion Paul consulted with Peter²⁴ and James and received from them both facts about Jesus and the gospel and their interpretation of it would in no way weaken his claim to complete independence in his reception of the gospel. The purpose of the passage is to argue that Paul enjoys the same apostolic authority as those who were apostles before him (Gal. 1:17), because he, like them, received his commission and his gospel directly from the Lord.

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²³ Here is an overlooked weakness in Bultmann's reconstruction of the *kerygma*, for Paul was not brought into "authentic existence" by the kerygma or Christian proclamation as Bultmann's interpretation requires. See "Paul" in *Existence and Faith* (New York, 1960), p. 115.

²⁴ C. D. Kilpatrick thinks that ἰστορήσαι Κηφῶν (Gal. 1:18) means "to get information from Peter". See *New Testament Essays*, A. J. B. Higgins, ed. (Manchester, 1959), pp. 144-9. But see F. Büchsel in *TDNT*, III, pp. 395-6. [Cf. the essay by R. Schnackenburg, p. 290 in the present volume, Edd.]