

On Defining the Central Message of the New Testament

The Reverend Professor Ernest Best
*Emeritus Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism
in the University of Glasgow*

The Ethel M. Wood Lecture 1986
Delivered at the Senate House University of London
On 4 March 1986

[p.1]

Few teachers of the New Testament have escaped the question as to the heart, core or centre of their subject. At some time or other some student will ask the question. As a result the divinity classrooms of the world are knee deep in discarded definitions. I do not propose to add to that depth. I only wish to raise some of the preliminary issues which must be considered before any attempt is made to seek a central message or heart to the New Testament. In this way I shall avoid laying my head on the block and I hope also fulfil the terms of this lectureship in avoiding subjects of theological controversy. Before I go further I would express my gratitude to the University of London for its invitation to deliver this lecture and for the honour it has done me in allowing my name to be added to the long line of distinguished lecturers.

I shall look first at the need to discuss our question, then at some of the attempts which have been thought to answer it and finally at some of the issues which these attempts raise.

I

Two centuries ago no one would have thought our question worthy of discussion but the rise of the historical critical method and its application to the study of the New Testament has changed all that are now aware of the diversity of the material in the New Testament.¹ This has created an acute problem both for those who attribute normative value to its writings and also for those who because of curriculum requirements have to teach the book as an existing unity. In turning now to outline briefly the diversity within the New Testament I am not concerned with the diversity of literary material, letters, gospels, accounts of miracles, sermons and all the rest. The diversity which causes trouble is that of factual statement and theological view.

There are factual differences which are difficult to reconcile. Did Jesus cleanse the temple on the day he entered Jerusalem as in Matthew or on the day after as in Mark? Did he die at the time of the slaughter of the passover lambs as in John or had he eaten the passover as in the Synoptic Gospels? Can Paul's account of the struggle over the admission of Gentiles be

¹ For detailed discussion of diversity see e.g. John Charlton, *New Testament Disunity*, E.P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1970; J.D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, S.C.M., London, 1977.

reconciled with that of Acts? These divergences may seem of little importance to scholars and of value only in providing material for examination questions but as anyone who has had to deal with lay people who have discovered them will know they can cause great heart burnings. There is no need now to deal with either their reconciliation or their actual unimportance.

Of greater significance are the divergences in theological outlook within the various writings of the New Testament. Since Luther's day it has been traditional to put forward a possible divergence between Paul and James as the most likely candidate for discussion. There are now many other candidates. In using Mark Luke eliminates his statements giving soteriological significance to the death of Jesus. Jesus dies as martyr, witness and hero rather than to save men from their sins. There is then, not unexpectedly, a considerable difference between the picture which Luke presents in Acts of Paul and his theology from that which we gain from his own letters. Apart from differences of chronology between John and the Synoptics they diverge considerably in the picture they offer of Jesus in

[p.2]

that in John he talks so much more about himself and his position as Son of God. There are again differences between the soteriologies of John and Paul.² If we read Romans chapter 13 and Revelation chapter 13 we encounter differing responses to the way in which Christians should view the state. Finally there are differing views about the nearness of the parousia, and that even within one writer, Paul.

I make no attempt to detail or defend any of these differences. They are amply discussed in the standard textbooks; even those who would play them down, if not deny their existence, indicate by the amount of attention they give them that they constitute a serious problem. If the New Testament had been a systematic theology written by one person, or even by a group of people who met together to discuss what should go into it, there might have been no problem. The diversity is caused in the first place by the situationally conditioned nature of each of the New Testament books. There cannot then be any easy harmonisation and we must expect to find, at the very least, the same truth expressed in different ways. Because of the differences in Jewish and Hellenistic culture a Jew and a Greek would affirm the importance of Jesus to themselves with different words and thought forms, though there might indeed be little over which they would quarrel if each thoroughly understood the thought of the other.

However there are deeper reasons for diversity than the situational nature of the writings of the New Testament. There may be different understandings of what Plato wrote; there are much greater differences in respect of Socrates because we do not have direct access to him but can only approach him through the writings of others. We do not have direct access to Jesus. But, and this is significant, those who did have direct access as his disciples were compelled to change their view of him after his resurrection. Then they saw his life as a whole and saw that it harmonised with his teaching.³ Believing in his resurrection they

² E.g. see R. Schnackenburg, 'Paulinische and Johanneische Christologie: Ein Vergleich' in *Die Mitte des Neuen Testaments* (Festschrift für Eduard Schweizer, ed. U. Luz and H. Weder), Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1983, pp.221-237.

³ Cf. P. Pokorný, *Die Entstehung der Christologie*, Calwer Verlag, Stuttgart, 1985.

viewed him from a wholly new perspective.⁴ What they have handed on to us is not then a series of responses to his teaching in fresh situations, as Islamic scholars may be said to have done with the teaching of Mohammed. In order to come to terms with what they believed had happened they had to take up categories and concepts that are not normal to logical and scientific thought. Even Jesus' death in full accord with his teaching now took on a changed significance as they saw in it their own salvation from sin and victory over the supernatural powers which previously had governed their destinies. Uncharted ways lay before them and it was natural that they should move along different paths as they sought to accommodate what had happened in Jesus with the old and new problems they encountered day by day.

If then diversity was inevitable it also has its value for those who believe that their faith and behaviour should be guided by the New Testament, not to speak of its value for those who year by year have to set examination questions. Our situations, culture and world view are in many respects very different from those of the first century. Were we faced with a monolithic set of writings all coming from the same situation and culture and possessing the same world view then we would find it difficult to know how to make the transition from that position to our own and so how to use the New Testament as a primary source for our lives. The variety of response to changing circumstances within the New Testament gives us a first clue as to the ways in which we ourselves may respond to that to which the New

[p.3]

Testament writers were responding when they wrote their books. When we see the theological presuppositions that led Mark, Paul, John and Peter to adopt particular answers to their problems we are more easily able to see the answers which we should be offering to our own. The view of the state presented in Revelation 13 has enabled the church to endure in many situations of persecution; the view presented in Romans 13 was useful to me in a border parish in Northern Ireland where smuggling was rife: the law must be obeyed! This aside the variety within the New Testament also saves us from a narrow dogmatism in theological assertion. If the primitive church could accept differing opinions may not we? This is of great importance in the ecumenical area where contending churches sometimes adopt the position: unless our view is accepted we will not play ball.

Once we grasp the extent of the diversity in the New Testament we may feel like asking whether there is a central message at all This question was asked in an extreme form last century when it was argued that Paul was a second founder of Christianity and indeed its real founder in the form in which we know it. He had perverted the simple religion of Jesus into a mystery cult. Few, if any, would hold this view today. I shall therefore assume in what follows that there is a central message and offer only two sustaining arguments: (i) Those who brought together the writings of the New Testament in the second to fifth centuries believed they contained a common message which made them into a unity. (ii) In some way all the writings reflect the teaching, personality, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. I am not arguing that the early church made the best selection of what was available; perhaps some of what it included ought to have been eliminated and other material included.

⁴ Cf. U. Luz, 'Einheit and Vielfalt neutestamentlicher Theologien' in *Die Mitte des Neuen Testaments* (see n.2), pp. 142-161.

We cannot deal with this issue for most of the material no longer exists. Paul's own letters show we do not possess all he wrote (1 Cor. 5.9; 2 Cor. 2.3; 7.8), If we had access to the writings on which Luke in his prologue says he depended (1.1-4) we might prefer them. None of this however can be taken to imply that there is not some kind of unity within the present canonical New Testament. Before we go on to examine some of the statements of the central message I would like to reinforce any doubts you may have as to the difficulty of the task. Within Protestantism it has been traditional to see Paul, if not as the centre of the New Testament, at least as very close to it. This was perhaps satisfactory in the days when there was agreement as to Paul's central message, that of the justification of the sinner by God's grace through Christ. But today not even Protestant scholars are agreed that this is the centre of his thought. Schweitzer found it in his Christ-mysticism.⁵ R.P. Martin finds it in the theme of reconciliation.⁶ There is no need to explore these views. I only mention them to underline the difficulties of our task. Equal difficulties would appear if we set out to state the central theme of the teaching of Jesus or of the theology of John. If we cannot agree on the central theme of any one writer in the New Testament is it likely that we shall agree on that of the whole New Testament?

II

I now go on to examine some statements of the central message.⁷ My approach will be neither systematic nor chronological. The statements I

[p.4]

have selected are chosen not for their intrinsic or historical value but because they open up the presuppositions underlying any attempt to deal with it. I do not intend to criticise all or any of them in detail but only in so far as this will assist us in our search for the underlying questions which require our attention. Few of those I shall mention in fact set out to answer our question but they gave implicit answers which rightly or wrongly have been regarded by others as statements of the central message of the New Testament.

(1) Clearly one way of producing an easily stated unity within the New Testament is to cut down on its variety. Historically the first person consciously to adopt this method was Marcion through his elimination of anything that did not fit with his picture of Paul. However Luther's attempt to do the same has been of much greater significance, and there are many who still follow it.

Luther regarded as of primary importance John's Gospel, I John, the letters of Paul, especially those to the Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, and I Peter. In his translation of the New Testament he placed James, Hebrews, Jude and Revelation in a kind of appendix. The

⁵ A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (E.T. W. Montgomery), London, A. & C. Black, 1931.

⁶ R.P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology*, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London, 1981.

⁷ Alan Richardson wrote in the Preface to his *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (S.C.M., London 1958), p.10 'We must all have *some* (italics his) notion at the back of our minds about the meaning of the New Testament as a whole, and it is just as well that some people should try to say what it is'. I for my part am happy to examine what others have written without necessarily agreeing with their proposals.

remaining books fell into some in-between category. The criterion he employed was whether a book did or did not preach Christ. However to say that a book preaches Christ is very difficult to express in a way with which everyone will agree. What one scholar or churchman regards as preaching Christ will be disputed by another, as can be observed when any serious dispute arises about the faith of the church. Luther was thus compelled to go on and associate with the preaching of Christ the doctrine of justification by grace. This in fact then became for him the central message.

It does not take us long to discover difficulties with this solution. (i) Quite apart from it being regarded as the main thrust of the New Testament there is as we have seen no agreement that it is the main thrust of Paul. (ii) It is doubtful if John would have known what we were talking about if we had told him this was what his Gospel was really about. (iii) Paul formulated his teaching on justification over against certain views he found among Jewish Christians on the continuing validity of the Jewish Law for all Christians. Granted he was correct in rejecting these views not all heretics are Judaizers. There may be difficulties in refuting other heresies if we have always to begin from a doctrine of justification by faith. Luther probably only selected justification by faith as central because the views he found in the Catholic church of his day appeared to be very similar to those he found rejected in Paul's letters. (iv) The doctrine of justification by faith is essentially individualistic in outlook for it speaks of individuals being right in the sight of God. Many of our problems today arise out of our social culture and are basically social rather than individualistic. An individualistic central doctrine may not then be a good starting point from which to tackle them. (v) In Luther's day the question 'How can I be right with God?' was important. The penances and indulgences against which he protested had been designed to deal with this issue. How many people in Western civilisation today are worried at all about their stance before God? These criticisms begin to open up for us the wider issues which are involved in any statement of the central message of the New Testament. For that reason I have given them greater attention than I shall give to the views of others.

[p.5]

(2) I need only allude briefly to what in one sense appears to be the opposite solution to that of Luther. For many liberal theologians of last century Paul was cast aside and the central message of the New Testament became the teaching of Jesus. Their faith lay in the historical Jesus rather than the Pauline Christ. This historical Jesus was one wholly denuded of traditional theological dogma and devoid of any trace of supernatural colouring. Since the Jesus these scholars found by use of historical methods is no longer one acceptable today it is unnecessary to do other than to point out that they discovered their 'central message' by concentrating on the synoptic Gospels from which they derived eternal principles and by ignoring all other parts of the New Testament. Like Luther they first selected an internal canon but came up with a very different result because the selected canon was different.

(3) A third way of dealing with the problem is simply to ignore it and to assume that every writer in the New Testament held the same basic view. Since it is normally extreme right-wing conservatives who adopt this solution they tend to discover traditional Protestantism reflected in every part of the New Testament. If Luke omitted certain soteriological sayings of Jesus which he found in Mark he did so because his readers already knew Mark and he did

not need to repeat what was in that Gospel. Similarly when Luke wrote about Paul he assumed his readers knew Paul's letters and therefore did not need to give in detail his theological position. This is a caricature and it would be difficult to find any thinking conservative who would hold it. To ignore the problem will not make it go away. Traditional Catholics of course have never needed to produce a solution since they are not interested so much in the central message of the New Testament as they are in that of the church.

(4) Our next possible solution was much in vogue in the days when Biblical Theology reigned supreme. One of the brief statements of primitive belief which are contained within the New Testament is selected and taken to represent the church's kerygma. It is assumed that it ought to be possible to discover within Scripture a statement in its own terms expressing its essential message.⁸ Before instancing possible passages it is important to look at the underlying assumption of this approach, and indeed of much writing on our subject. As Kümmel says, though not in picking out a primitive creed but in defence of his choice of Jesus, Paul and John as the key witnesses, 'We can expect to encounter this witness in its purest version in those forms of primitive Christian proclamation which stand closest in point of time to the historical Christ event'.⁹ Is it true that the earliest will be the purest? A moment's reflection will show that this is certainly not true of experience in general. My immediate reaction to some of the statements of politicians with whom I disagree is to grow hot under the collar but after I have cooled down I may be prepared to allow that there is something in what they say; after some years I may even allow that they were actually right! Turning more directly to our own area when we look at the primitive church we quickly discover changing views. It was only after a bitter fight that the earliest view that Gentiles could not become Christians unless they first adopted Jewish ways was held to be false. The earliest was not here the purest! Even if we moved to a slightly later period, say around AD 55, and conducted

[p.6]

a poll of Christian thought, the majority view might still have been that of Jewish Christianity.¹⁰ That no primitive creed incorporating such a view has survived may simply represent the victory of the other side.

We look then at some of the kerygmatic statements that have been offered and at some that might have been offered, if the searchers' own theology had not predetermined their choices. I leave aside the very brief confessions like 'Jesus is Lord' as lacking content. The creed most usually favoured by those who adopted this approach was that summary which Paul handed on to the Corinthians:

⁸ Related to this approach are those who see the message of the New Testament encapsulated in one particular verse. For a brief selection of suggested verses see N.M. Watson, '...To make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead' in *Die Mitte des Neuen Testaments* (see n.2), pp. 384-398 at p. 388. He himself suggests 2 Cor. 1.9b. To his list we may add W.G. Kümmel, *The Theology of the New Testament* (E.T. J.E. Steely, Abingdon, Nashville and New York, 1973), p.333 who selects Heb. 13.8.

⁹ Op.cit., p.324.

¹⁰ On the presence of diversity from the very beginning see S. Schulz, 'Die Anfänge urchristlicher Verkündigung. Zur Traditions- and Theologiegeschichte der ältesten Christenheit' in *Die Mitte des Neuen Testaments* (see n.2), pp. 254-271.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appears to Cephas, then to the twelve (1 Cor. 15.3-5).

Alternatively the Philippian hymn (2.6-11) could be advanced or the summary of Peter's sermon to Cornelius (Acts 10.34-43) or what appears to be the content of Paul's first preaching to the Thessalonians:

You must turn from idols to serve the living and true God and wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1.9f).

Curiously what I take to be the only definition of Christianity in the New Testament was never suggested:

Religion (and in its context that is not a reference to religion in general but to Christianity) that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (James 1.27).

These brief creeds are all very different. They do not all even refer to the death of Jesus. None of them mentions God as creator. Only the summary of Peter's speech to Cornelius introduces the Holy Spirit. Only the verse from James introduces the need for some kind of moral behaviour on the part of Christians. They are then all very truncated expressions of Christianity.

(5) In view of the failure to extract from Scripture any brief creed which fully represented primitive Christianity it might be more helpful if we attempted to draw up one for ourselves which would take account of the areas neglected in those we have examined. I shall consider two attempts. The first, that which C. H. Dodd framed as representing the preaching of the primitive church as it could be learnt from Acts with corroboration from the Pauline letters. Dodd did not intend this to represent the central message of the New Testament but from time to time others seemed to have taken it in that way. Dodd offered six points:

1. The prophecies of the Old Testament have now been fulfilled.
2. This has happened in the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

[p.7]

3. He has now been exalted to God's right hand as Messiah and Lord.
4. This belief has been confirmed by the gift of the Holy Spirit.
5. Jesus will return to bring God's purposes to their consummation.
6. Meanwhile men have an opportunity to repent and to receive forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit.¹¹

¹¹ C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1944, pp. 21ff. I have quoted the summary as given in G.B. Caird, *The Apostolic Age*, Duckworth, London, 1955, pp. 37f.

Most of the language in this summary is biblical or closely related to the Bible. Its attractiveness lies in that and also in the feeling that in it we come close to the earliest gospel as the first apostles proclaimed it and thus near to Christ. The earliest as the purest? Before we leave it I would draw your attention to one significant feature within it and one problem raised by it. The feature is the explicit reference to the Old Testament, admittedly present also in 1 Cor. 15.3-5. For the moment we note this; we shall return to it later. The problem relates to the faith of the summariser. Dodd was not very keen on seeing the parousia as a part of true Christianity but he included it in the summary because it was important for the first Christians. Has then the central message to be in accord with what we take to be the essence of present Christian faith or with the faith of the primitive church?

(6) In the winter of 1899-1900 Harnack gave public lectures in the University of Berlin on the nature of Christianity. He extracted what he took to be its essence from the teaching of Jesus and expressed it in three sentences which became the section headings in his outline of that teaching:

- i. The kingdom of God and its coming.
- ii. God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul.
- iii. The higher righteousness and the commandment of love.¹²

Unlike many of his fellow liberal theologians Harnack did not reject Paul.¹³ He began with the picture of Jesus and argued that Paul had followed Jesus in his own writing. What conservative, and indeed many other Christians, would term the essential Paul just disappeared from his picture of Paul. Thus his summary of Jesus' teaching became in effect his summary of the message of the New Testament. He acknowledged the apocalyptic element in the teaching of Jesus but regarded it as occasioned by the period in which Jesus lived and not as essential to it. He believed he had therefore been able to unleash the eternal message of Jesus from its contemporary trappings and to restate it. A comparison of his summary with that of Dodd shows that unlike Dodd's it is framed in non-biblical terms and is consciously designed to express the central message of the New Testament in the terms of Harnack's own generation and culture. This raises a question to which we shall return, but before leaving Harnack it is wise to remember that like Luther but unlike Dodd he had a great public hearing.

(7) We turn finally to J.D.G. Dunn who alone of those we have considered has set out deliberately to define the central message of the New Testament. Recognizing the variety of material it contains he concludes his book *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* by setting out what he terms its 'unifying strand' or 'integrating centre'¹⁴:

[p.8]

That unifying element was the unity between the historical Jesus and the exalted Christ, that is to say, the conviction that the wandering charismatic preacher from Nazareth had

¹² A. Harnack, *What is Christianity* (E.T. by T.B. Saunders), Ernest Benn, London, 1958.

¹³ Op. cit., 128ff.

¹⁴ S.C.M., London, 1977, p. 369; cf. p.376.

ministered, died and been raised from the dead to bring God and man finally together, the recognition that the divine power through which they now worshipped and were encountered and accepted by God was one and same person, Jesus, the man, the Christ, the Son of God, the Lord, the life-giving Spirit.¹⁵

We note here that the unity of the New Testament is defined in terms of a modern theological issue, the relation of the historical Jesus and the exalted Christ.¹⁶ No one denies that this issue has bulked large in recent scholarly work but it would hardly have been acceptable as a unifying theme at the time of the Reformation and I suspect will not be a hundred, perhaps not even twenty, years from now.

III

We now turn to some of the issues which have been appearing in one or other of these statements of the central message. I intend to raise a number of questions which seem in the light of the attempts we have examined to require an answer before the formulation of the central message is itself attacked. For lack of time I cannot treat two major fields of concern: Is there a canon within the canon? Is there a New Testament theology or are there a number of such theologies?

(1) There is one major area on which it is necessary to touch even if it is impossible to deal satisfactorily with it: In how far is the answer we give dictated by the view of the nature of the New Testament with which we commence? We might take it to be a verbally and infallibly inspired series of propositions. Summaries of documents of this type are common and select the most important propositions from which the others can be derived. Alternatively the New Testament might be regarded as a set of reactions or responses to the needs of particular situations. From the way someone behaves in differing situations we learn quite a lot about them and sum them up in a phrase or word. So the New Testament might be summed up in a brief statement or an idea or a symbol. If we toss a stone into a pond we set up a series of ever-widening ripples. The writings of the New Testament could be regarded as these ripples with Jesus as the stone. Since as the ripples spread they are affected by the wind and drifting debris we would need to take a ripple as near as possible to the point where the stone was thrown, i.e. an early creed would seem most satisfactory. There are many other possible views of the New Testament but we neither need to enumerate or evaluate them. My point is that before we can begin to answer the problem which is the subject of this lecture we need to be clear in our own minds what we take the New Testament to be. I go on now to raise some less fundamental issues.¹⁷

(2) What areas of the content of the New Testament should any statement of its central message cover? If we look at the historic creeds of the church they contain both historical

¹⁵ p. 369; cf. p.376.

¹⁶ Cf. S. Neil, *Jesus through Many Eyes*, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1976, p. 180, 'There is a real continuity between the words of Jesus and the words about Jesus'.

¹⁷ My own views will be found in *From Text to Sermon*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, Georgia, 1978, chapter 1 and in 'Scripture, Tradition and the Canon of the New Testament', *Bulletin John Rylands University Library Manchester*, 61 (1979), pp. 258-289.

material, 'suffered under Pontius Pilate' and propositional material, 'God of God; Light of Light'. But they do not contain ethical or experiential material. If we recall the

[p.9]

answers to our problem at which we have already looked most of them also lacked these two areas. Is there not a need to include statements of the type 'Love your neighbour as yourself' and 'you must be born again'? To put this another way: all the statements at which we have looked were cast in the indicative mood; are statements in the imperative mood not also necessary? If someone alleges that statements require to be cast in the indicative then this raises the question whether what we are really after can in fact be framed as a statement.

(3) Are we attempting to express what is central to the New Testament or what is central to the Christianity of the first century? If the latter we might have to delete from consideration any books of the New Testament written outside that period and to include any others, or any other evidence of whatever type, coming from within that period. That however is in a way a minor matter. The significance of the question can be seen when we realise that the importance of a belief or practice to the early church may not be proportional to the amount of material about it in the New Testament. Christology of some kind features on its every page but outside the Gospels we rarely find direct teaching about God. The first Christians were Jews and probably did not need much of such teaching. In addition views that at one time were important in primitive Christianity may later have been played down. We do not learn from Acts the extent of the bitterness of the controversy about the admission of Gentiles to the church. Whatever diversity we discover within the New Testament is probably only a reflection of the wider diversity within first century Christianity. Many streams of thought have been detected:¹⁸ a Jewish Christianity, perhaps to be associated with Q, a Pauline, a Johannine receptive of many ideas from Hellenism. Perhaps there was also a stream which ran off into the developed gnostic systems of the second century. These streams did not all necessarily accept one another as valid manifestations of the Faith. Extreme Jewish Christians did not accept Paul; nor did the Johannine stream if it is held to include Revelation for it gives only twelve gates into heaven, one for each of the Twelve and none for Paul. If we decide to seek a centre to first century Christianity rather than to the New Testament we must also answer the question as to the date at which we should seek that centre. The centre might have been formulated very differently in AD 50 and AD 100. one last problem in this area: our primary source for our understanding of the first century is the New Testament; if there are already difficulties about determining its centre will there be not even more about determining that of which it only partially reports?

(4) Is the statement, to employ mathematical terms, to be the HCF or the LCD of the content of the various writings of the New Testament? To put this another way: have we to disentangle a definition which is found in or underlies every writing or have we to frame a definition which includes every important statement made in any one of the writings? Note the use of the word 'important' here. Whatever views we may have on the superiority of one author to another in the New Testament there is no doubt that within any one writer there are

¹⁸ Pokorný, *op. cit.*, pp. 68, 80, while not doubting the existence of different christological strands doubts whether they call today be easily disentangled from one another.

relatively more and less important passages. That Jesus died on the cross is much more important than that he performed a particular healing in Capernaum rather than Jericho. Clearly judgements can vary as to what is important; there are commentaries on Romans which peter out after 12.8¹⁹ and on

[p.10]

Galatians after 4.11²⁰ as if what followed did not matter. So how does one decide what is important? The presuppositions with which we commence will determine what we end up with. Our personal view of the nature of Christianity may determine what we consider important in the New Testament. If we take orthopraxis to be relatively unimportant compared with orthodoxy we shall write off the end of Romans and Galatians. But how do we determine what is important? The argument is bound to be to a certain extent circular. To deal with this it has been suggested that there are a number of relational centres like the incarnation or the Kingdom of God to which everything else may be connected;²¹ but the selection of these centres would not go undisputed. Dodd and Harnack would not have agreed on what they were.

(5) In what terms should the statement be expressed? Dodd and Harnack chose very different types of words; Dodd selected his mainly from the New Testament itself, Harnack from current religious discussion. It might seem that we would answer the implied question solely in terms of our theological position. Of that I am not sure. Other factors may enter. The author of Colossians appears to have taken up gnostic, i.e. non-biblical, terminology current in his community to express what he thought was a basic theological position. If our supposed summary statement is intended for the use of non-Christians that might be the better approach. And that raises another question to which we shall return: for whom is the statement designed? As we are beginning to see the questions which we need to face are not wholly unrelated to one another and too hasty an answer to one may commit us to answers to others before we have reached and considered them.

(6) Is the statement intended to be one which faithfully describes what a first century Christian might have answered or is it to be one acceptable to contemporary theological opinion, to say nothing of non-theological opinion. If we decide it should be acceptable to a first century Christian we need to specify which. Would Paul have agreed with a summary drawn up by Luke or John, to say nothing of James? The issue here about the first century and today is not quite the same as, but is not unconnected to, the question whether in, interpreting a text we seek the meaning 'then' or the meaning 'now'. Another way of putting it is to ask whether our statement is to be one intended to satisfy an academic examining board or one to be used in explaining Christianity to a church group? Both Luther and Harnack believed that their very different answers had contemporary relevance. An illustration will point up the issue and relate it to some of the other questions.

¹⁹ E.g. A. Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (E.T. by C.C. Rasmussen), S.C.M., London 1952.

²⁰ E.g. G. Ebeling, *Die-Wahrheit des Evangeliums*, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen, 1981.

²¹ Cf. E. Flesseman-van Leer (ed), *The Bible: Its Authority and Interpretation in the Ecumenical Movement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 99, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1980, pp.50f.

Within the New Testament the parousia occupies a very prominent position; it does not do so in many modern theologies. Ought it to be included in any statement of the central message? If we omit it our summary will certainly not be acceptable in the southern United States. If we include it some will say that we are burdening ourselves unnecessarily.

(7) You will have observed that in some of the suggested summary statements the Old Testament has featured either directly or indirectly. Ought it to be there? This is an equivalent question to that which asks whether a New Testament theology can exist independently of the Old Testament. Marcion's summary of the New Testament would certainly not have contained any reference to the Old Testament. Our answers here will depend on the degree to which we see the New Testament as dependent

[p.11]

on the Old.

(8) This leads to yet another question. In the strict sense the Old Testament has no christology; only a theology. Almost all, if not all, the summary statements at which we looked were *christologically* oriented rather than *theologically*. It was natural that Christian Jews should express the centre of their faith in christological terms. This was what was new. They still believed in the same God as they had always believed in, but they now understood him in a new way through Jesus. Thus they naturally emphasised christology. When the message was taken to the hellenistic world it was unusual to find atheists; again what was required was a modification of the Gentile's view of his god or gods in the light of his encounter with Christ. Hence all the brief statements and creeds in the New Testament are centred on Christ and God is hardly mentioned. If we are to express fairly the intention of the New Testament ought we not then to introduce into our central message some mention of God? To take a particular example. It was unnecessary to stress in the New Testament a supernatural origin to the world for almost no one doubted that it was supernaturally created in some way. This belief was part and parcel of unexpressed New Testament faith. Should it appear in our summary?

(9) Must every expression of the central message be set in terms dictated by the culture in which it is drawn up or is there an eternally valid core which can be expressed in eternally valid words? Since some New Testament statements are more important than others it is relatively easy to think of a distinction existing between core and periphery or between constants and variables.²² But if we allow that there is a core can this be put into invariant words which will never need to be changed? Clearly those who thought the kerygma could be expressed in one of the New Testament's own brief creeds were unworried by any doubts about this. They recognized neither the cultural conditioning. Returning briefly to the last point: the New Testament creeds exhibit their cultural conditioning by the absence of any need to express directly a belief in God; our culture may require us deliberately to draw this out because today so many in Western Europe are practical atheists, whatever the opinion polls may reveal about their supposed belief in God.

²² Cf. D.A. Hagner, 'Biblical theology and preaching', *Exp. Times*, 96 (1984/5), pp. 137-141.

(10) This leads to another most important question. If a brief central message is required for whom is it being drafted? Luther and Harnack had the world at large in their sights; Dodd and Dunn had, or have, their colleagues and students. The nature of the audience will obviously determine the type of language, academic, ecclesiological or everyday, to be used in its compilation. An allied question to that of the prospective audience is the purpose for which the brief statement is intended? Some academics might answer in the terms 'mountains exist to be climbed'. Ecclesiastical politicians might wish a statement so that they can use it to check on the views of supposed 'heretics'. Yet others might desire one in order to form a basis for the uniting of two denominations. In such cases it often turns out to be so inexact as to be almost meaningless or ambiguous words are employed so that everyone will be satisfied. Any simple statement may indeed conceal more than it reveals. If it is designed for church use there is still an

[p.11]

important question to be settled: is it intended for internal use within the church or for apologetic and missionary use outside it? These issues bring us back to a previous question: if the constituency for which it is intended does not have the firm and accepted belief in the existence of God which was to be found in the first century world will something of this nature not need to be expressed and the statement become theological in tone rather than christological?

(11) As we have been thinking about these questions you may have been checking out in your mind the answers you would give, or you may have been moved to ask a more fundamental question. Is a verbal statement in fact possible? Would we not be better to give up the idea and approach the matter in some other way. Perhaps by using the term 'message' I gave our inquiry the wrong orientation from the beginning. The parts of the New Testament may be so linked together that they cannot be isolated and some selected as more important than others. Just as Paul rebuked the Corinthians for desiring positions of prominence within their community by reminding them that they were members of the one Body so the parts of the New Testament may be linked to one another as in an organism and require the support of one another.²³ To isolate certain elements in a brief summary may be to destroy the unity of the whole. It may be then that we ought be looking for a central drive or thrust rather than a statement.

Such a drive or thrust need not necessarily be expressed in strictly verbal terms. This is what Luther had in mind when he isolated as the central drive what preached Christ. Yet this as we have seen turned out to be so vague that Luther had to go on and define it more precisely in terms of justification by faith. Another approach along these general lines might be to say that a sign or symbol would be the best expression of the centre of the New Testament. Clearly the sign would have to be something like a cross. Last year I was in Seoul, S. Korea, and from a high-rise building it was possible to pick out the churches by their illuminated crosses. The power of that symbol in a pagan city cannot be disregarded. Yet those who mounted those crosses on their buildings would probably be among the first to say that of themselves they were insufficient and were only intended to guide people inside where they would receive a

²³ Cf. Watson (see n. 6).

verbal message. The New Testament is verbal and it is doubtful if we can entirely escape stating in words what is central to it.

Perhaps then instead of a sign we might select an idea, necessarily verbally expressed, which would give the key to the whole. The liberal theologians of last century selected the kingdom of God, conservative evangelicals might pick 'born again', 'reconciliation'²⁴ would be popular in a western democracy and 'liberation' in the third world. The 'man for others' had its brief vogue. None of these means much without considerably further expansion. To the western world kingly rule is almost unknown, Nicodemus had great difficulty in grasping what rebirth was, who is being reconciled in reconciliation (an employer and a trade union being led to a compromise with which neither is fully satisfied?) from what are people being liberated in liberation? Is the Son of God just a *man* for others?

One further way of escaping this verbal tangle may be to look for the

[p.12]

unity of the New Testament in the recipients of the kerygma rather than in a form of words. Any statement of the central message will be mythological in character and unsuitable to the situation of the contemporary world. To insist on words is to tear apart the act of thinking from the act of living.²⁵ An existentialist translation of the words thus becomes a necessity, and for some theologians this means they must be expressed in anthropological rather than theological terms. The New Testament offers us a genuine understanding of ourselves. This understanding is produced in varying degrees by its different writings but principally by those of Paul and John. Bultmann, for whom this might have been a possible approach if we had been able to ask him about it, in outlining Paul's theology breaks it up not according to the normal christological, pneumatological and ecclesiological divisions but in relation to man before and after faith. What unifies the writings of the New Testament may then be the self-understanding they produce in those who hear the kerygma in faith. Yet even if this be granted it does not seem that we escape our problem for if man's self-understanding is to be communicated it needs to be expressed verbally. Most of our questions would then still remain.

(12) It is curious but significant how little the Gospels have entered into this discussion. They comprise more than 45% of the New Testament and if Acts is added as further narrative more than 58%. The early church had presumably good reasons for including such narratives. But can narrative be summarised? Is not an essential element lost in the very attempt. Those who have read the summaries of novels that have been produced from time to time by the Readers' Digest or by educational (?) publishers for the benefit of children preparing for examinations can have no doubt how much the summary loses. Almost all the statements we have considered have concentrated on the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus. Harnack may have drawn on the life of Jesus but it was only in order to produce propositional statements. The sermon of Peter in Acts 10 included a brief reference to Jesus' activities during his ministry

²⁴ E.g. P. Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments: Eine Hermeneutik*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1979, pp. 225ff.

²⁵ Cf. R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* S.C.M., London, 1952, 1955, Vol. II, pp. 250f.

but the author of Acts did not need to give more for his readers already had his Gospel in their hands with its much fuller account.

We are predisposed by the way we conduct our academic work to value propositional statements above narrative. Yet may the question not be raised as to the indispensability of narrative to Christianity. If this is answered affirmatively where are we to find a place for narrative in a central message if narrative loses a great part of its value in being summarised? The first Christians obviously found simple credal statements insufficient. Letters treating particular issues needed to be written; then the Gospels were composed. The early Christians must have reasoned at least in part like this: if we say Jesus healed, we need stories of how he actually healed; if we say he loved sinners, we need stories of how he loved particular people; and so on. From the variety of incidents recorded much more is learnt than from any simple affirmation that he healed and loved. Indeed to deny this would be tantamount to denying a major section of the canon.

But would one Gospel not be sufficient? Why four? If we only had one we would lose a considerable number of incidents and therefore of variety. Would a harmony like Tatian's *Diatessaron* not overcome this

[p.14]

difficulty? No facts would be lost. But even if at one stage and perhaps still in the popular mind the Gospels are miniature biographies no scholar today would allow that each does not also carry an interpretation of what is reported, and this applies as much to the individual synoptic Gospels as to the Fourth. A harmony would carry an interpretation of its own not necessarily reflecting the interpretation of any one of our four Gospels but certainly reflecting the interpretation of its compiler. Moreover if as I argued earlier variety within the New Testament is important this is surely also true of the four Gospels and for the same reason. We need four narratives of Jesus not simply that we may have a greater variety of material but so that we may see that no one interpretation of any particular incident or of Jesus himself is absolute. If Jesus is to be easily related to our situation either as the historical Jesus or the preached Christ then variety of interpretation is essential.

This brings us to the crux of our problem. The existence of the Gospels makes any central message a shadowy substitute for the real thing. If we think back a little to the reasons offered for the value of the diversity of the New Testament we will recollect that it was its very diversity which enabled it to be used in our culture and situations. If we reduce it to a set of statements, a simple drive or a core then we shall always have difficulty in applying it. (This may not be a problem if we are concerned only with discovering some centre for academic purposes). It is important then to retain both the diversity of ethical situation and response in the letters and to retain the variety of outlook in the four Gospels. If we attempt to formulate a central message may we not be robbing the New Testament of something which is essential to it and to our use of it?

There with only one or two further remarks I must stop. I acknowledge that from time to time the church needs to define what it believes and in so far as it sees the New Testament as either the primary source for its belief or normative for it it will draw up brief statements of its

central message. These may be necessary both to rebut heresy and to affirm truth, especially perhaps when churches are in discussion with one another. All such statements will be time-conditioned and will repeatedly require renewal and replacement. There is no neutral statement which will last for ever. Even academics as they write New Testament theologies and answer the questions of their students are forced from generation to generation to change what they say. In the end it is because of the cultural conditioning of any statement, the need for a precise definition of the situation for which it is required and the narrative nature of the Gospels that I have refrained from offering you the form I think it ought to take.

Whenever I preach I endeavour to bring that to which the New Testament witnesses before my hearers. This Sunday's sermon and next Sunday's will be very different because I start from different passages of Scripture and face different issues. Anyone who recorded all I said would find contradictions for there is no simple core message to be repeated in parrot fashion from Sunday to Sunday but a continuing re-expression of that to which the New Testament itself is faithful. I end with a couple of examples drawn from the New Testament. The first

[p.15]

comes from Paul when he was attempting to persuade the Corinthians to contribute more generously to the needs of the saints in Jerusalem. Into the middle of a number of more or less prudential arguments he threw in one which not only destroyed all his careful prudence but, more importantly, restated the doctrine of the incarnation in a vivid and exceptionally relevant way:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich (2 Cor. 8.9).

In AD 56 in Corinth that was probably the central message of the New Testament, but it was probably not that for AD 57 when chapters ten to thirteen of 2 Corinthians were being written. The second example is drawn from the First letter of John. Dealing with an actual schism, or the possibility of one, in which those with whom he disagreed were stressing spiritual experience, knowing God, rather than loving behaviour the author wrote:

He who does not love does not know God; for God is love (4.8).

That was the central message in Asia at the end of the first century. Again it might not be the way we would put it.