
The Use of the Gospels in Evangelism—I

by A. J. M. Wedderburn

We recall an Ulster evangelist of whom his friends said that he could not even preach from John 3: 16 without first proving the inspiration of Scripture. His reasoning ran: Scripture is the Word of God; John 3: 16 is part of Scripture; therefore, John 3: 16 is the Word of God—pay heed to it! Most evangelists seem readier to leave it to the Spirit of God to authenticate the biblical text as His own word and to get on with the business of expounding and applying it. Dr. Wedderburn, Lecturer in New Testament in the University of St. Andrews, thinks that many of them take too much for granted and make unexpressed assumptions which ought to be avowed and, if necessary, defended. Since many of our readers might find in Dr. Wedderburn's paper presuppositions which seem to them inconsistent with the standpoint of our Quarterly (especially those postulated for the sake of the argument on pp. 87 ff.), we have invited Mr. T. E. Brinnington, who has long experience of the use of Scripture in evangelism, to give us his reaction to it.

For our part, we are confident that there is no lack of integrity, no conscious element of bluff, in the procedures which raise questions in Dr. Wedderburn's mind. When Dr. Billy Graham, for example, appeals with repeated assurance to what "the Bible says", he has given notice in advance that an unquestioning acceptance of the testimony of Scripture is the axiom underlying all his preaching, and for him the statements of the four Evangelists, taken simply at their face-value, form part of that testimony.

THIS article arises out of a sense of unease and dissatisfaction at the contemporary use of the four Gospels, and particularly the Fourth, in the evangelistic practice, written and spoken, of conservative evangelical circles. It is written in the hope, not that their voice may be silenced, but that they may in their evangelism use the Gospels with more sensitivity and awareness of their nature and, by openly stating the assumptions which they are making and those which they are rejecting, may preach with the greater honesty and integrity.¹

¹ I am greatly indebted to a number of friends who read and criticized an earlier version of this article, and particularly to the Rev. Dr. I. H. Marshall who made a number of valuable suggestions as to its form and content; but, although many of these have been followed, the responsibility for statements made here is mine alone.

I. A CURRENT CONSERVATIVE EVANGELICAL USE OF THE GOSPELS IN EVANGELISM

(a) *The evangelist's task.*² Naturally enough the Gospels are widely used and for a variety of purposes; what concerns us here is their use as proof, implicitly or explicitly, of the divinity of Christ. Sometimes this claim is made explicitly: "Our purpose is to marshal evidence to prove that Jesus was the only begotten Son of God."³ Sometimes it is less explicit, but all the same the assumption is there that because the Gospels say that Jesus said and did certain things, therefore he actually said and did exactly what the Gospels record, and that therefore this compels us to accept a certain estimate of his person. Quite apart from the fact that the first-hand experience of what Jesus said and did certainly did not compel Jesus' contemporaries to accept "that Jesus was the only begotten Son of God", we also have to look hard at the question how much a certain statement in the Gospels "proves". Of course within the framework of a certain set of assumptions it could prove a lot: but not just within the framework of a doctrine of the infallibility of Scripture; rather within the framework of that doctrine interpreted in a certain way, namely as entailing that the Gospel writers give us a verbatim account of Jesus' teaching and a 'photographic' account of his actions and that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit guarantees that there is no discrepancy or variation from what actually happened in the accounts. By this guarantee we can confidently pass behind the Gospels to an immediate contact with Jesus as he actually was. Naturally enough these assumptions do not seem to be spelled out for the benefit of unbelieving hearers or readers, but this sort of unproblematic access to the reality of Jesus' life is the tacit or unconscious assumption of this approach. The most that may be conceded is that certain details *may* be wrong, but the main substance can be assumed to be accurate.⁴ By making this sort of assumption the evangelist can go on to 'prove', at least in the looser sense of establishing as true beyond reasonable doubt, such tenets as the divinity of Christ, and any who are open to argument, whose minds are not closed by willful unbelief, will recognize that this is a, if not the, logical conclusion from the data given in the Gospels: either the person who spoke and acted thus was an impostor or deluded or he spoke the truth.⁵

² A distinction is made here between "evangelists" with and without a capital letter; the former refers to the writers of the four Gospels, the latter to practitioners of evangelism.

³ J. R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity* (London, 1958), p. 21.

⁴ O. R. Barclay, *Reasons for Faith* (London, 1974), p. 80 (I am grateful to the author for sending me a copy of this very readable book, which contains much useful material).

⁵ Stott, *op. cit.*, pp. 32f.

(b) *The nature of the evidence.* What assumptions does this make about the material which we have in the Gospels? Most, understandably, will not seek to convince their hearers or readers at this stage of the inspiration or infallibility of the scriptures; rather "it will be enough to treat them as historical documents . . . as a substantially accurate record of the life and teaching of Jesus."⁶ After all, it may fairly be argued that this is what they claimed to do, or at least what one of them claimed to do (Luke 1: 1-4). Undoubtedly they are "historical documents", at least in one sense of the words; for "historical" has a whole range of meanings and in this context might mean either 'composed in, and belonging to, a certain period in history' (as opposed to 'timeless', as, for instance, the Book of Mormon might be claimed to be) or 'giving an accurate record of what happened in history' (as opposed to 'unhistorical' or 'fictitious'). The first would be an unexceptionable statement, but the latter requires more justification. But this is presumably what is meant, and this justification is most commonly given by a mixture of ethical and practical arguments or bald statements: the writers either told the truth, or they lied to deceive us, or perhaps they did not care about the truth. The last is incongruous, the second would be impossible at the early date when the Gospels were written, because their statements could be checked, or else it would impugn the integrity of the whole early church.⁷ Invention and unconscious exaggeration are likewise impossible.⁸ And yet we are given cause for thought by the remarks of Canon E. M. B. Green, written not specifically apropos of the Gospel accounts, but of the quest for truth in general in the first chapter of one of his evangelistic books:

Where then is truth to be found? "Ah," you say, "in objective reporting, in scientific, historical writing." I'm sorry, but there is no such thing. When I report a happening, striving my best to be impartial, I am nevertheless recording my own impressions of what is significant in that event. I am making a selection: so is the historian and the reporter. And that selection is largely determined by our own presuppositions, education, character and so on.⁹

This assessment will be seen to be highly significant also for our treatment of the Gospels.

II. PROBLEMS OF THIS APPROACH

In this section I propose to deal with a number of questions which the approach to the Gospels outlined above seems to raise, and also with one, that of the doctrine of Scripture, which may seem to be presented by my tentative answers.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷ Barclay, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-2.

⁸ Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁹ *Jesus Spells Freedom* (London, 1972), pp. 14f.; regrettably the treatment of the Gospels later in the book does not always reflect this insight.

(a) *What did the Gospel writers mean to do?* The evangelist's approach seems to concentrate on the Gospels as informative documents and it is undoubtedly true that the four Evangelists intended their writings to be that. But it has come to be widely recognized that the Gospels are also theological documents; they do not baldly state facts, but they also interpret them. This is generally recognized of the Fourth Gospel: "these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God . . ." (John 20: 31). But it is also now recognized that this is true also of the three Synoptic Gospels and that the difference between them and the Fourth Gospel is one of degree, not kind; hence Dr. R. P. Martin writes of Mark's Gospel:

While it is a record of history in its literary form, its chief characteristic is that it is theology cast in a narrative style of writing.¹⁰

This judgment is significant in that it suggests that Mark's dominant concern is theological rather than historical, and to that extent it goes further than Canon Green's assessment of the nature of the work of historians and reporters. It suggests that we here have a form of narrative in which proclamation and interpretation are of primary concern.

Undoubtedly, however, the writers regarded themselves as being faithful to, and in their thinking controlled by, what had happened. But the question which we have to ask here is whether this faithfulness would be seen by them as involving a strict adherence to every detail of Jesus' words and deeds, at least as far as that were possible. Were the Gospels meant to be works of history in the sense in which we and most men in our twentieth-century Western world understand the term? And did they employ the same criteria and seek the same objectivity as we usually look for in a historian or a reporter of news? And, more important, dare we *assume* that they did and that they will therefore serve as grist to our evangelistic mills in the same sense as, for instance, Hansard might be used by a political historian or newsreel films by a modern historian? Moreover, would it be honest to make that assumption without acknowledging it when one was aware that many scholars assert that the Gospels, and particularly the Fourth, contain varying degrees of legendary or mythological material and that the words which they put on Jesus' lips reflect the ideas and understanding of early Christians about Jesus and themselves rather than give a verbatim account of his teaching? One may disagree with these views of the Gospels, but the ethical question which the theologically literate evangelist must ask is whether he should engage in a form of bluff with his hearers who are, he hopes, less aware of such theories or

¹⁰ *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* (Exeter, 1972), p. 103.

whether he should go to the trouble and pains of saying what he assumes and why. The almost innate veneration for Scripture as a 'holy book' that is so widespread, even among those otherwise not particularly religiously inclined, may mean that his bluff is not called. But is his silence any more honest than that of a salesman seeking to sell his product but omitting to say that some experts claim it to be worthless, or an electioneering politician who claims his policies to be a panacea for his country's ills although he knows that others take the opposite view? And should his standards and his openness not exceed theirs?

I wish to argue therefore, albeit tentatively at this juncture, that we would be more true to the Evangelists' intentions if we regarded them primarily as proclaiming what they believed about Jesus and how they interpreted his life, rather than as seeking to provide data and facts from which others could argue. Secondly, I wish to call in question the whole approach which demands that their writings either conform to our standards of objective reporting or be branded as fraudulent, for this is a false posing of the alternatives.

(b) *What were the Gospel writers able to do?* One question which I have not raised so far is whether the Evangelists were able to report Jesus' words accurately at all. Were the sources and materials available to them such as would give them a reliable report of his life? Of course one can circumvent this difficulty by appealing to the work of the Holy Spirit; in this case the Spirit would enable them to bypass the normal procedures of, and obstacles to, historical investigation, by providing a supernatural and immediate contact with the reality of Jesus' day. But if one eschews this escape-route and gives due weight to the human limitations of the writers, then there is no escape from the question of the reliability of the Evangelists' sources. Admittedly this problem can be lessened if one holds that at least the First Gospel and the Fourth are written by persons who were eye-witnesses of the events which they describe; but, in the first place, this is a highly controversial assumption, far bigger than the more likely one that they were written in fairly close contact with the tradition of eye-witnesses, and, secondly, one is still not rid of the question of the reliability of the eye-witnesses' memory. Is unconscious exaggeration so really unthinkable? Or is it so impossible that later reflection should colour the description of events long past? Is C. H. Dodd's view not more plausible when he argues that

... the gospels record remembered facts, but record them as understood on the farther side of the resurrection. There is no reason why this should be supposed to falsify or distort the record, unless, of course, it be assumed at the outset that such a belief *cannot* be true.¹¹

¹¹ *The Founder of Christianity* (London, 1971), p. 40.

Of course this does "falsify or distort the record" if the record is held only to be valid as a 'photographic' record of events, with no optical illusions or tinted lenses. But the argument of the preceding section was that this was not a legitimate demand to make of the Evangelists.

On the other hand, as soon as one reckons with the Evangelists having used material other than what they themselves remembered the situation is vastly complicated, and we have to do justice to the various factors at work upon tradition, both oral and written. The process of handing down material, both sayings and stories, exposes the material to a number of influences which may militate against the end-product being an exact reproduction of the original. For example, translation from one language to another may mean that full justice is not done to the original or that its sense is misunderstood; obscurities may lead to explanatory glosses; contemporary needs may cause the material to be moulded to apply to a particular situation different from that which originally obtained, a process without which it would be in danger of fading into irrelevant obsolescence; the art of story-telling may lead to embellishment of the material for the sake of vividness or to fill in gaps left in the tradition, and in this process the experience of the narrator and the hearers may be the influential factor rather than any historical enquiry into what actually happened; unconscious anachronisms may enter the tradition¹² and deliberate anachronisms may be used to present the living Jesus to the hearers. These and other factors may have been at work on the materials which the four Evangelists had to hand. That they did not wholly overlay the original so as to hide it beyond recognition is perhaps surprising, but is nevertheless indicated by the difference between the message put on Jesus' lips and that of the early church; one need only note a small point like the widespread use of the phrase "the Son of Man" in the Gospels and its almost total absence in the rest of the New Testament, a difference which can most obviously be explained by positing that Jesus himself used the phrase characteristically, in some way or other, and his followers rarely did. But that does not justify us in refusing to make allowances for the formative effect of tradition behind the Gospels, and yet the evangelistic approach which has been described in the first part of this article has obliterated or minimized this gap in time and contact between the description and the things described.

¹² Particularly in the use of titles; this is, to my mind, a danger inherent in Christological studies centred around the use of particular titles; why should a Christian narrating the events of Christ's life in A.D. 60 and accustomed to address him in a certain way feel the need to be scrupulous in preserving a historical record of the manner of address used by Jesus' disciples during his lifetime?

Now it is clear that different pieces of material will be influenced to varying degrees by the process of their being handed down, and there will be plenty of scope for argument as to how much tradition has influenced any particular piece of material. Conservative evangelicals may feel relatively happy about conceding that a detail may be wrong here and there, but we have seen that a serious distortion of the tradition like the growth of a "Jesus 'myth'" is not countenanced; interestingly enough it is rejected by one evangelistic writer, Dr. O. R. Barclay, not because it is inconceivable but because "the time between the writing of the Gospels and the events which they narrate was too short."¹³ In itself this is a perfectly legitimate historical argument¹⁴ and yet it rather misses the mark: in the first place those who claim that the whole story of Jesus is a 'myth' are relatively few and far between, at least in theological circles; far more common is the assertion that the NT writers have used 'mythological' language and already existing 'mythological' ideas to express their theological interpretation of the life of Jesus, which is a very different thing. More seriously, this argument does not reckon with other sorts of possible embellishments, and particularly legendary ones, such as abound in the NT Apocrypha. It is therefore incorrect to pose the choice of truth or 'myth'; there are other alternatives than these, and it is by no means so certain that the gap of thirty or more years is insufficient for such modifications.

A. N. Sherwin-White records at the end of his *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*¹⁵ an interesting disagreement which arose between him and his fellow historian, P. A. B. Brunt; he had argued from a comparison with Herodotus that "even two generations are too short a span to allow the mythical tendency to prevail over the hard historic core of the oral tradition"; Brunt pointed out that in the case of Alexander the Great there was "a remarkable growth of myth" (by which he probably means what I should prefer to call 'legend') centred around his person even "within the lifetime of contemporaries". Yet, Sherwin-White counters, a hard core remained and the historian Arrian could still tap uncontaminated sources in the second century A.D. This is very interesting for our case since it does show that such embellishment could quickly

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 82.

¹⁴ Compare the trenchant article of M. Hengel ("Christologie und neutestamentliche Chronologie") in *Neues Testament und Geschichte: historisches Geschehen und Deutung im Neuen Testament: Oscar Cullmann zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. H. Baltensweiler and B. Reicke (Zürich and Tübingen, 1972), pp. 43-67; he points out how short the time was in which Christology took on its basic form as found in Paul's letters.

¹⁵ Oxford, 1963, pp. 186-93, especially pp. 190 and 192f. n. 2.

take place.¹⁶ Quite how far Arrian's success in 'demythologizing' takes us is another matter, since to be relevant to the question of the accuracy of the Gospels one would have to show that his historical concerns and purposes were shared by the Evangelists and, if they were, whether the Evangelists were able to, or in a position to, execute them with a like judgment. The more valid comparison might be with our hopes of success in historical research today aimed at discerning the reality behind the Gospel narratives. At any rate, the possibility of legendary embellishment cannot be thus easily dismissed.

One other problem is relevant here: most scholars have seen evidence of the formative effect of tradition (and of the Evangelists' editing of tradition) in, *inter alia*, the varying accounts of the same incident or the same saying given in the first three Gospels. In at least some cases it is well-nigh impossible to say that both or all accounts can be right and this raises the question of the reasons for the variation. In the light of this obvious difficulty it is surprising to find Mark 14: 62 cited as an explicit claim by Jesus to be the Messiah and the Son of God,¹⁷ when the parallel passage in Matt. 26: 64 substitutes for the plain "I am" the equivocal "You have said so" and that of Luke 22: 70 "You have said that I am". Which is right? Dare one assume that the explicit Christological affirmation is more original than the other more ambiguous answers? Would not the alteration of the hesitant or veiled answer to the bold and explicit one not be more natural? Or is there here presupposed, not only Markan priority, but also Markan 'neutrality' and 'innocence'? Is Mark supposed to tell an objective story, free from any theological axes to grind? That would be a mistake in view of Dr. Martin's judgment on Mark's writing quoted above, for if Mark's primary purpose is theological then we cannot discount the suggestion of Dr. J. R. Donahue that in this verse "the veil of secrecy surrounding Jesus which has dominated Mark's gospel is lifted"¹⁸ and that we see here an artfully contrived answer to the 'Messianic secret' that has pervaded the Gospel. In other words, we have to reckon in such a

¹⁶ Cf. also I. H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Exeter, 1970), p. 56, who refers to the speedy growth of legend attested in I-II Maccabees.

¹⁷ So, most surprisingly, by Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 44f.; even more surprising is his argument on p. 53, where he seeks to show that Jesus did not "rig" the events of his life so as to fulfil the scriptures "for . . . most of them concern his birth and death, and these are two areas where 'rigging' can't be done." In the first place this completely leaves out of account the question of the early church's re-telling of the life of Jesus so as to depict it as a fulfilment of Scripture; secondly, he confuses the "that" of Jesus' birth and death, which could not be rigged, with the manner of them, and the manner of his death was not altogether outside his control.

¹⁸ *Are You the Christ? The Trial Narrative in the Gospel of Mark*, S. B. L. Diss. Series x (Missoula, Montana, 1973), p. 91.

case with the possibility that the inexplicit, ambiguous response is the more original and that the bold answer is due to Mark's theological presentation of the tradition. And, unfortunately for those who wish to 'prove' things from this particular utterance of Jesus, as long as this possibility remains open their proof is undermined, and, unless it can be shown to be highly improbable, their argument is blunted.

To sum up this section, our answer to the initial question is that, unless one cuts short all argument by an *a priori* doctrine of inspiration, the Evangelists' work must be judged to be dependent to a considerable degree on the nature of the tradition which they received and with which they worked; it is again possible to invoke the work of the Holy Spirit at the stage of the transmission of the tradition, but this would be as open to objections as to invoke it as a guarantee at the stage of the actual composition of the Gospels. The possibilities of transformation in the process of tradition of tradition cannot be neglected by the historian of Christian origins nor, consequently, by the evangelist who argues from historical data.

(c) *What have the Gospel writers in fact done?* We turn now from the limitations imposed upon the Gospel writers by the nature of the traditions about Jesus to the question of the use to which they in fact put them. So far we have dealt more with the Synoptic Gospels, but now we must look at the Fourth Gospel, since this raises in its most acute form the problems inherent to a lesser degree in the other three. This Gospel is a favourite source of 'proof-texts' for evangelists who wish to show that Jesus claimed to be divine; if the religious teacher from Galilee is to be shown as "self-advancing" and "egocentric",¹⁹ they must turn primarily to this Gospel with its confident "I am" assertions and profound statements of the identity of Jesus as the only-begotten Son of his heavenly Father: "I and the Father are one" (10: 30); "I am the way, the truth and the life" (14: 6). (It is worth noticing at this point that the Synoptic Gospels portray Jesus as markedly less "self-advancing" and "egocentric" and that even the Fourth Gospel occasionally shows him as remarkably ambiguous in some of his answers and as consequently leaving his hearers in no little confusion and uncertainty as to who he was and what he claimed: cf. 8: 25; 10: 20, 24; 12: 34.)

But how far can we be certain that a particular statement put on Jesus' lips in the Fourth Gospel was uttered by Jesus on earth rather than being a theological statement put on his lips by the Fourth Evangelist? This writer not only clearly indicates his own reflections and comments upon Jesus' life (notably in editorial material like 2: 21-5; 4: 54; 20: 30 f.; cf. 21: 19, 23-5), but at times the words of

¹⁹ Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

Jesus and his own seem also to merge with one another to form one profound whole, so that one is at a loss to say where Jesus' words are meant to end and the Evangelist's to begin (so especially 3: 1-21);²⁰ one may also see a merging of Jesus' lifetime and that of the writer in references like those of 9: 22; 12: 42 and 16: 2 to expulsion, from the synagogue.²¹ Professor F. F. Bruce's explanation of these phenomena is worth noting:

We do, indeed, get a different impression of the self-disclosure of Jesus in this Gospel from that given by the Synoptists. . . . The evangelist, . . . who had meditated for many years on the significance of the acts and words of Jesus, had learned to appreciate even the earliest stages of the ministry in the light of its consummation. . . . So, towards the end of the first century, he set himself to tell the gospel story in such a way that its abiding truth might be presented to men and women who were quite unfamiliar with the the original setting of the saving events.²²

In other words, if we judge the Fourth Gospel by the criteria of historicity that obtain in our day we shall find him guilty of anachronisms; if we look at his theological purpose we shall find that he makes the living Christ speak meaningfully to his own day. Unfortunately he does not share our interest in, and desire for, historical proof; a bare record of what Jesus said and did would not necessarily lead men to understanding and belief, any more than the witness of their eyes and ears guaranteed belief and understanding in Jesus' contemporaries. And so he interprets Christ to his own contemporaries in a most impressive way, offering a reinterpretation of the Christian gospel hard to parallel in its profundity. That this writer of the "spiritual gospel"²³ was an eye-witness of the events which he describes, as Professor Bruce maintains,²⁴ might indicate that his theologizing was not completely uncontrolled, in that it would be the more unlikely that his portrayal would be utterly incompatible with the Jesus whom he remembered, but, even if this were at all certain, it would still not mean that one could simply read off his account as a literal record of Jesus' life. Still we are left with the

²⁰ Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents—Are They Reliable?* (London, 1943), p. 57: "there is no doubt that the fourth evangelist has his own very distinctive style, which colours not only his own meditations and comments but the sayings of Jesus and of John the Baptist. . . . it is, at times, difficult to decide where the Master's words end and where the disciple's meditations begin." But is it just a matter of style or of content also?

²¹ However J. N. Sanders and B. A. Mastin in the Black's NT Commentaries series (*A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, London, 1968, p. 242) argue that this is not an anachronism; yet, if this clearly-defined opposition to the disciples of Jesus was found in Jesus' lifetime, the close relationship that Acts portrays between the early church and Judaism—with the exception of the priestly rulers of the nation—is hard to explain.

²² *Op. cit.*, pp. 59f.

²³ So Clement of Alexandria in Eusebius, *H.E.* vi.14.7.

²⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 48.

problem of sifting his account, trying to discern where tradition (accurate or not) ends and interpretation begins, and perhaps achieving no very certain results in the end.

Should it surprise us that this is so, that the Fourth Evangelist has written in this way? Only, perhaps, if we are convinced that he should write in the way that suits us. After all, we are well accustomed to expositors of the Bible taking up the words and deeds of Jesus and filling them with a new significance and application. Compare, for instance, Professor J. S. Stewart's sermon on John ch. 3:

And Jesus did not need to search very far for his illustration that night. It was there, just asking to be used. "Listen to the wind, Nicodemus! Listen to the wind! Hark to it in the tops of the trees; the night air is full of it. But where it has come from and where it is going no one can tell. Now, Nicodemus, the Spirit of God is just like that—invisible yet unmistakable, impalpable yet full of power, able to do wonderful things for you if only you will stand in its track and open your life to its influence. Listen to the wind, Nicodemus, listen to the wind!"²⁵

Certainly this is no verbatim quotation of John 3; rather it might be described as an interpretative paraphrase and as such it stands in a long tradition, reaching back at least to the Aramaic Targumim of the Old Testament and Hellenistic-Jewish *haggadah*. None of us, I think, would consider it improper or reprehensible. And if modern exegetes and preachers can do this with the tradition which they receive, why should we object if first-century preachers and writers showed a similar freedom in interpreting and applying the tradition which they received? For if we did not possess John's Gospel, but only this passage of J. S. Stewart's, then in all probability we would be confronted with similar problems in recovering the original text of the Fourth Gospel as we now face in seeking to penetrate behind that Gospel to the tradition which lies behind it.

Now it has already been argued that the problems which the Fourth Gospel presents are shared, though perhaps to a lesser degree, by the other three. At this point, however, we should note Dr. Barclay's appeal to Luke's methods: he "claims to have done some careful research and to be recording only what he was satisfied was true" (but "true" in what sense?). He refers to contemporary history and "he was not indifferent to accuracy and, wherever we can cross-check, he turns out to have been an extraordinarily shrewd and reliable historian even in detail."²⁶ Is Luke's Gospel, then, such a very different proposition to the Fourth? Certainly Luke seems to be far nearer in his approach to what we think a historian should be; the style of his prologue (Luke 1: 1-4) indeed

²⁵ In H. Montefiore (ed.), *Sermons from Great St. Mary's* (London, 1968), pp. 120ff.

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 80.

probably indicates that he sought to emulate the style of other secular historians of his age. And to that extent attention to, and accuracy in, detail would befit the *genre* of his writing. But his writing nevertheless also reflects quite marked theological concerns, apologetic and otherwise, and it would be rash to assume that these had left no imprint on the traditions which he received.²⁷ As for his accuracy, certain features of his account give us cause for doubt: one reads no further than the start of the second chapter before one discovers that, whereas the conception of Jesus is set in the days of Herod the Great (1: 5), i.e. prior to 4 B.C., the birth of Jesus is apparently set 10 years later during the census of A.D. 6-7.²⁸ Now argument still goes on as to whether this is the right interpretation of Luke's text, but at least it leaves room for doubt; not that Luke is necessarily 'cooking the books'—he may simply be mistaken or confused or misinformed.²⁹ But even the possibility of error—and a glaring inconsistency at that—would open up the possibility that Luke chose to write in the form of a secular history, but to set in it a very different content, and that this content is his real interest. In fact his approach is very different to that of a secular historian, even one of his own time, who stands back from the events which he describes, cites his sources and evaluates them, judging some to be true and others to be false. There is no such detachment evident in Luke; his purpose stated in the prologue, he sets off into the narrative and we lose sight of him until he briefly re-emerges to set his second narrative in motion in Acts 1: 1.³⁰

- ²⁷ Cf. Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-7: Luke "is not the slave of his sources and he does not scruple to alter them when he sees fit, but in general he appears to base himself fairly closely upon them. The resultant picture of Jesus is different from that in the sources, but . . . it is unmistakably the same Jesus."
- ²⁸ N. Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh, 1965), pp. 23f., following Winer and Lagrange, seeks to avoid this difficulty by rendering Lk. 2: 2 "This census was *prior to* (the census) of Quirinius", but I find it hard to believe that the Greek could mean this. [This rendering is defended by A. J. B. Higgins, "Sidelights on Christian Beginnings in the Graeco-Roman World", *E.Q.*, 41 (1969), pp. 200f., and by F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins outside the NT* (1974), p. 192.]
- ²⁹ An instructive parallel is to be found in R. E. Brown's judicious warning against the attempt of certain Catholic 'fundamentalists' to preserve in all its details the Lukan description of Jesus' bodily nature in his resurrection appearances: "It is one thing to posit that the evangelists created a picture which they knew to be inaccurate in order to confute their opponents; it is another thing to say that they reported an already existing picture of the risen Jesus, a picture of whose detailed accuracy they did not have control" (*The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*, London and Dublin, 1973, p. 88).
- ³⁰ An apter parallel might be with the methods of Jewish historians, but they again are further removed in their approach from modern concepts of historical scholarship.

However, we must guard at this point against misrepresenting what the Evangelists seem to have done (and particularly the Fourth Evangelist) by accusing them of simply "inventing" what they wrote about Jesus.³¹ Perhaps when some detail was added to a story for the sake of verisimilitude or for other reasons this comes near to invention, but for the most part what they were doing could not be so described. We have seen that it makes the best sense of the Fourth Gospel to say that the writer is presenting the claims of Jesus to his own day in terms of the faith in Jesus held by himself and by his fellow-Christians; it would be inaccurate to say that they "invented" those claims, since they believed rather that these claims were at least implicit in what Jesus actually said and did, that they had been made explicit and vindicated by God's raising Jesus from the dead, and that the Spirit had subsequently led Christians to confess Christ in these terms. They would have denied that they were exaggerating these claims and that they were doing so "unconsciously";³² Jesus was actually as great as he claimed to be in their presentation, and they deliberately sought to make these claims apparent. But proof from history was not their primary concern.

(d) *How can we use the Gospels?* In the light of what has been said it might be thought that the Gospels have been rendered useless for the evangelist's purpose, or indeed for any preaching at all. And in fact the arguments advanced above may be rejected by some for that very reason. It might seem that preaching would be made impossible either on practical grounds, because the material in the Gospels would become so enormously complex to handle, or on more theological, or at least 'spiritual', grounds, in that the preacher would be robbed of that authority upon which he depends for his preaching, the authority of God himself speaking in Scripture.

The first objection says, then, that preaching, evangelistic or otherwise, has no time to reckon with a whole series of possible objections and difficulties; these are a distraction from what is far more important, the Christian message and challenge. Certainly it does complicate the whole business of handling Scripture, but if that complication is not worth the time spent on it is there any point in trying to treat the Christian faith in an intellectually respectable and satisfactory way in the first place? For, after all, our starting-point has been an approach to evangelism which does not seek to coerce people into salvation but to persuade them of its reasonableness. What this article is trying to point out is the danger that this reasonableness may be specious. It may be granted that all this ground cannot be covered within the span of a twenty-minute sermon, or

³¹ Cf. Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

³² *Ibid.*

even one of conservative evangelical proportions, but that is not so much an argument against doing it as against trying to do it in the compass of one short address. It argues rather that evangelism, and preaching, should take place within the context of a whole educational programme where these issues can be handled thoroughly and honestly. Indeed, the onus lies upon those upholding the legitimacy of short-cuts to justify their procedure.

The second objection says that to take account of these questions about the Gospels would 'disarm' the preacher; but is this not to make the ends justify the means? To ignore these issues, it may be said, to present what the Gospels say as unquestionably and literally true, is the only way to powerful preaching which brings results, in the shape of many responding and being changed; to start to deal with them is to cut away the ground from under the preacher's feet, leaving him struggling in a morass of uncertainties and pitching his hearers into a bewildering confusion of arguments and counter-arguments; arguments become less decisive, issues blurred and responses more equivocal. But does the end, of bringing as many people as possible to a clear-cut decision, justify any means? Does it justify psychological manipulation? If not, why should it justify specious or unfair arguments? If the love of truth dominates our intellectual activity, then we have to ask whether there is any truth in the various claims of critics about the Gospels. If we feel that we can reject them all as false, and do so with integrity rather than for convenience's sake, then we should be prepared to say so and to say why, that is, to present arguments, rather than simply to ignore the existence of such issues. But if in fact there are good grounds for many of these critical claims, based as they often are on real problems in the Gospel narratives, then it is a piece of make-believe to behave as if they did not exist, and an admission of intellectual bankruptcy to put up false antitheses to be knocked down.

How then can we use the Gospels? Let us for the moment assume that we hold a radical position with regard to the Gospel material, such as that represented by Professor Norman Perrin in his book *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*:

The early Church made no attempt to distinguish between the words the earthly Jesus had spoken and those spoken by the risen Lord through a prophet in the community, nor between the original teaching of Jesus and the new understanding and reformulation of that teaching reached in the catechesis or parenesis of the Church under the guidance of the Lord of the Church. The early Church absolutely and completely identified the risen Lord of her experience with the earthly Jesus of Nazareth and created for her purposes, which she conceived to be his, the literary form of the gospel, in which words and deeds ascribed in her consciousness to both the earthly Jesus and the risen Lord were set down in terms of the former. . . . So far as we can tell today, there is no single pericope anywhere in the gospels, the

present purpose of which is to preserve a historical reminiscence of the earthly Jesus, although there may be some which do in fact come near to doing so because a reminiscence, especially of an aspect of teaching such as a parable, could be used to serve the purpose of the Church or the evangelist.³³

The question is how we can use the Gospels if we assume that we cannot be certain that anything in them is free of the creative activity of the early church or the Evangelists. To posit such an extreme position may serve to clarify the issues at stake. However, before embarking upon an attempted answer we should note that Professor Perrin himself does not despair of penetrating behind the Gospel accounts to discover what Jesus himself originally said; rather he seeks still to follow the trail blazed by the studies of his former teacher, Professor Joachim Jeremias, on the parables, although he concedes that these have shown that "the way back from the early Church to the historical Jesus is a long and arduous one."³⁴

Given, then, such an assessment of the Gospel material, how can we use it? We are all familiar with the evangelistic practice of calling upon people to 'give their testimony', but Canon Green employs an interesting variation of this practice when he, as it were, calls upon the different NT writers to give their testimonies to the position of Jesus Christ—the writer to the Hebrews, Paul, and John.³⁵ The only unfortunate aspect of this is that he includes Jesus' testimony to himself, which for reasons set out above is problematic; moreover, it is not on the same level as the others, in that it is mediated through written documents at second-hand (at least), whereas the other testimonies are communicated first-hand by the documents. Otherwise this procedure is thoroughly sound: we have immediate contact in the writing of these men with their views of Jesus and their undoubtedly high, staggeringly high, estimates of him; moreover, these testimonies possess an objectivity and an intellectual power that is often lacking from the testimonies given at evangelistic meetings. But we only have to substitute the witness of the four Evangelists for what he cites as the witness of Jesus and we are once more on solid ground and are begging no questions. It may be questionable whether Jesus said this or that, or whether he said it in quite that way, but the Evangelists did say this of him and believe this of him, and of this there is very little room for doubt.

³³ London, 1967, pp. 15f.; cf. the recent attempt, and by no means an unsuccessful one, to pull out a fairly considerable plank from Perrin's platform by D. Hill, "On the Evidence for the Creative Rôle of Christian Prophets", *NTS* 20 (1973/4), pp. 262-74. [Professor Perrin's death in November 1976 is a sad loss to New Testament scholarship. Ed.]

³⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 21 (cf. p. 32); the reference is to J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London, 1963).

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 44-7.

But when using the Gospels in this way we would be better to avoid the word 'proof'; that I believe something to be the case 'proves' nothing, for I may be mistaken in my belief; but it is evidence, and if it is corroborated by other evidence it will give a correspondingly high degree of probability to my belief. As in a court of law, where many witnesses are called and advocates seek to establish the coherence or incoherence of the evidence which they give, so we may call a series of witnesses to the person of Christ and their testimonies can have a cumulative effect in establishing the nature of Christ and the manner of his life.³⁶

I said above that the testimonies of the NT writers were different from those that we usually hear at evangelistic meetings by virtue of their objectivity and their intellectual content; that the latter is greater should be plain, but how are they more objective? They are so because they did not seek to express their faith merely in terms of feelings and experiences, but in terms of a narrative about the earthly Jesus. They did not give their account the form of a 'myth' as we would normally understand the term, but portrayed a man of flesh and blood, recognizably one of us, a man who really lived. They did so, not out of antiquarian interest, but because they believed that in that man's life something decisive happened, that he was the one towards whom their faith was directed, and that there was a real danger if Christian faith was allowed to stray from this objective reality away into subjective feelings and speculations.³⁷ Their whole purpose would be frustrated if the life which they described was a make-believe.

But at this point the objection may be raised that this ultimately throws us back upon the Evangelists; we are dependent upon their integrity, their judgment, their skill; we either have to take what they say or leave it. Hence Professor Ulrich Simon argues that

Form criticism . . . comes uncomfortably near the traditional view that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are more than empty code names and that authority derives from them, though they were not apostles, not eye-witnesses, not "there". This result is now broadly based upon a variety of data and common sense, rather than ecclesiastical dogma.³⁸

This may not be a bad thing. Some conservative evangelicals may welcome it and claim that it underlines the need for a doctrine of

³⁶ For another use of cumulative argument to get beyond the impasse of the uncertainty attaching to the individual items in the tradition about Jesus cf. E. Trocmé, *Jesus and His Contemporaries* (London, 1973), especially pp. 36, 122f.

³⁷ Cf. R. P. Martin's admirable assessment of the concerns that led Mark to write his Gospel (*op. cit.*, especially ch. VI); cf. also E. Käsemann, "Blind Alleys in the 'Jesus of History' Controversy", *New Testament Questions of Today* (London, 1969), especially pp. 49f.

³⁸ "The Problem of the Biblical Narrative", *Theology* 72 (1969), p. 252.

inspiration; this, and this alone, will give the Evangelists' words a divine authority. But the outsider may not be satisfied with this; can he simply take the Evangelists on trust? Can we expect him to do so? It is important that Professor Simon sees this authority as based not on dogma, but on evidence and common sense; there are reasons to give credence to the Evangelists and we may find their account historically convincing, once we understand the way in which they view and describe that history. (This last condition is crucial.) However, in the last analysis, our acceptance of their account is an act of faith, just as much so as their description and interpretation of the life of Jesus; we do not accept their account because it has been 'proved', but because a whole complex of factors have impressed us as pointing towards a verdict similar to theirs about Jesus; these factors include the fact of their faith and that of their contemporaries in Jesus, all that we can glean from their records by critical study of what Jesus was like and the impression which he made upon the early church, and the existential impact made upon us by the proclamation of Jesus in the New Testament. Our decision will be a leap of faith, but not a leap into the unknown; rather it will be a leap towards that light which shines, now brightly, now less clearly, through the accounts of the Evangelists, shining through from the reality which lies behind their accounts and to which they seek to bear witness. But in all this assessment of the evidence we must be careful to distinguish what is first-hand from what is second-hand or third-hand; if the faith of the Evangelists impresses us, let us say so, rather than trying to project this faith back on Jesus himself, for if we do that we in fact draw further away from reality. We lose sight of the enigmatic Jesus of Nazareth who was a source of bewilderment to even his closest friends and companions, and are left wondering at the enigma of the unbelief of the contemporaries of a Jesus who so manifestly declared his nature. Faith's vision may be legitimate, but that vision is not granted to all, and if the historian, *qua* historian, is left with anything but an enigma he is being untrue to historical reality: he would be left with a Jesus who proves himself rather than one who rather refused to prove himself (Mk. 8: 11 f. and parallels).

(e) *The implications for our view of Scripture.* Rightly the evangelists who were quoted in Part I of this article refrained from appealing to the infallibility and inspiration of Scripture to support their argument; rightly, since it would be dangerous to assume that all their hearers would concur with this presupposition. Rather they sought the neutral ground of logic and objective arguments, and this was commendable; only their logic was faulty and their arguments' objectivity was spurious, since, perhaps unconsciously, they carried over their attitude to Scripture into their arguments; as

Christian believers they had been taught not only to revere Scripture, but to interpret it and use it in a certain way, and these attitudes were carried over unquestioningly into their evangelistic practice. Now, I wish to argue, we have to look more carefully and critically at what we are doing.

It is important to recognize that this challenge to accepted practice does not necessarily come from an abandonment of the traditional conservative evangelical doctrine of Scripture *per se*. For this doctrine has always maintained, at least in its most intelligent expressions, that it is important to remain true to the intention of the writers of Scripture: thus it is pointless to take all things in it literally if the writers did not intend them to be understood literally; we are untrue to Scripture if we take literally what was expressed in poetic language, etc. The questions raised here have now come from a new understanding, held also by a number of prominent conservative evangelical theologians, of the intentions and purposes of the writers of the four Gospels. On the basis of this understanding it can be argued that it is the evangelistic practices which I have described that are untrue to Scripture and to the intention of its writers.

It is quite compatible with the approach to the Gospels necessitated by this understanding that one maintains that the Gospel writers were inspired. Only one must take a rather different view of how they were inspired and to do what: they were inspired, not to record infallibly the details of Jesus' life and teaching as they actually were, but to witness to, and interpret theologically, that life and teaching for their own day. After all, that is the work of the Spirit claimed by very many, if not all, Christian preachers today; we have seen that the way in which they handle the text of Scripture is free and imaginative, rather than in bondage to the very letter of that text. It is therefore perhaps surprising that we should be so slow and reluctant to grasp that the Gospel writers, and before them other Christians, showed a like creative freedom and imagination in their handling of the traditions about Jesus. Are we not in danger of separating off the work of the Holy Spirit in the writing of Scripture into a separate compartment, making it a work utterly different in kind from any present activity of the Holy Spirit in the church and thereby destroying the continuity of the tradition of the church, oral and written, both before and after the recording of its earliest traditions about Jesus in the Gospels?

One final point needs to be noted. The challenge to accepted practice has come, as was said, not from a rejection of any doctrine of Scripture, but from a new interpretation of Scripture. This seems to underline something which I have long felt to be the case, that conservative evangelicals, in preserving the 'shibboleth' of biblical infallibility, had lost sight of the fact that the more important issue

and the greater problem lay in the area of the interpretation of Scripture. In a sense the hermeneutical question renders the question of infallibility irrelevant: unless one knows what the Bible is saying and how to interpret it, how can one really say that the Bible is true? Or what is the use of saying that something which one cannot understand is true, unless to tantalize? Of course, if one holds a doctrine of Scripture with a built-in statement of how it is to be interpreted and what it says, then the problem of interpretation is not allowed to arise, but the result may then be that Scripture is incarcerated in a straitjacket. My own view is that judgments about the worth of Scripture and its place in the church's life and witness, as well as about its truth, should be based on *a posteriori* arguments rather than *a priori* ones;³⁹ Scripture should be allowed to speak for itself and to claim its own right to be heard for itself; both Christians and non-Christians should be permitted to listen to the Bible as it really is and to its writers in all their human frailty speaking of their convictions; for both Christian and non-Christian alike the result may well be liberation and a true work of the Spirit who moved the Evangelists to write their accounts.

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³⁹ Similarly it may be argued that a doctrine of inspiration should be based on observation of the nature of Scripture; this is preferable to basing a doctrine of Scripture on preconceived ideas of what inspiration is.