
Epilogue

This book has sought to demonstrate how the gospel has addressed the central issues of life posed by people in different cultures and times. It has also suggested how the gospel continues to address the ultimate issues of people in different cultures of the contemporary world. In terms of implications for ministry, this study suggests that the gospel should be addressed to people in terms of their spiritual issues rather than from the traditional perspective of the Christian's sharing the gospel.

Frequently, a reorientation of the church's theological perspective has resulted from the faith experience of a single individual. Furthermore, orienting the theology, worship, or practice of the church around a specific element of the gospel has often happened because that particular element spoke powerfully to the spiritual crisis of an entire generation at a particular time and place. As this orientation became institutionalized, however, the gospel had the danger of taking on a cold, scholastic tone, becoming locked in tradition. It then took a new crisis for people to find a different element of the gospel that provided a fresh vision of God through Christ. In the life of the church, the older generation has a heightened responsibility to recall that what speaks to one generation does not necessarily speak to another.

Over time the church tends to identify the gospel with that element that has dominated its experience. In fact, the gospel itself becomes veiled in the theological system, liturgical practice, ecclesiastical pattern, or devotional discipline that formed the context in which the gospel had meaning. It is then easy to transfer the meaning from the gospel to the church structure. The end result can be loyalty to tradition rather than faith in Christ. Loyalty has little to say to a new generation in crisis, but Christ offers salvation. This problem is as old as the teaching of Jesus about wineskins. The church has often had no room for people whose conversion or faith experience did not conform to the institutionalized pattern.

This problem does not belong only to those groups that place a high value on tradition. Tradition by itself is not the problem; it may

actually keep the gospel message alive. Groups that decry tradition, such as Baptists and Pentecostals, are susceptible to the same danger. For when accepted norms and patterns of spiritual experience become institutionalized, then the gospel becomes veiled by the traditions of a previous generation. Those patterns may have facilitated faith in a different context, but now they inhibit the experience of Christ they once fostered.

Though specific elements of the gospel address specific issues of life, this study has also observed that by concentrating on only one aspect of the gospel to the exclusion of other aspects, the danger of heresy, error, or division arises. The gospel is not a theological system, but the story of salvation through Jesus Christ. Preoccupation with any single part of that story gives a distorted picture of Christ. This tendency turns to functional polytheism if one group stresses one aspect of the story while another group stresses a different aspect. By refusing to see all the other aspects of the story of salvation, groups can develop rival pictures of Christ set in opposition to each other. Thus, the Docetists saw an exclusively divine Christ while the Arians saw only a human Jesus. Rival pictures need not be heretical to achieve distortion. When one group focuses on social justice, as seen in the Incarnation, as the total gospel, they are as guilty of distortion as the group that reduces the gospel to a lecture on how the atonement works.

This study has also suggested that the effort to make the gospel applicable to the issues of a particular time and culture may lead to theological problems several generations later. The veneration of the saints, the Western understanding of transubstantiation, and the adoption of the *filioque* phrase in the creed all arose as part of an evangelism methodology. While these methodologies proved effective in their inception, they all led to controversies in later generations when they had lost their evangelistic context and grown into dogma. This phenomenon therefore calls into question the notion of pragmatism as the test for evangelism. New teachings inevitably result from evangelistic methodologies, and these teachings eventually become institutionalized. In this regard, success may not be the best test. The church does not have unlimited freedom to conform the meaning of the gospel to the attitudes and values of a culture for the purpose of gaining adherents.

Certain aspects of this study will seem to add new depth to the idea of superficiality. My biblical treatments are conspicuous for their avoidance of some of the more obvious critical questions employed in twentieth-century biblical criticism in the West. Unfortunately, the schools of biblical criticism have not yet settled on the proper method of study. The twentieth century has spawned more approaches to the truth than the last twenty centuries combined. From the approach I had initially begun of examining the context of particular letters, the theologies of particular writers, and the other distinctions that the prevailing theories of criticism help expose, I shifted to a rather simplistic method. As I looked at all the distinctions, I was struck by the remarkable similarity of themes regardless of author or context. Thus, the study suggested an overarching consensus of the apostles about the implications of the gospel.

In the area of church history, extremely complex dynamics have been reduced to rather simple narratives that will leave scholars of the different epochs aghast. Those concerned with the practice of ministry, on the other hand, may wonder why so much space was devoted to things that happened so long ago. One is left with the dilemma of pursuing church history as an end in itself in order to reconstruct what happened, or of attempting to make some judgments in order to appropriate the work of church historians for the benefit of those who must lead today's churches in the proclamation of the gospel. While the treatment of the historical settings in which the gospel has been explained will not satisfy the scholars who debate what really happened in those settings, it nonetheless suggests the diverse applications of the gospel over twenty centuries and the power of the gospel to touch lives.

The preceding comments concerning biblical studies and historical studies should not be taken as a rejection of critical scholarship. Rather, they represent a bit of the frustration that one must feel when moving from the tools of examination to the task of theological reflection that leads toward informed ministry. The methods of study and examination in these classical disciplines have been in flux since the times of Origen and Eusebius, and they are not settled yet. The methodology must fit the questions being asked. The effort to integrate classical disciplines with the practice of ministry

requires the kind of interplay and mutual informing that results in a modification of the discipline for its own sake.

If biblical studies and church history studies have had a weakness in this century, it may be that they have suffered from opposite problems. While biblical studies have tended to move away from historical understandings of the gospel (*Historie*) to stories about God (*Geschichte*), church history has moved away from stories about God's involvement in the church to strictly historical understandings. This study has sought to recapture some of what each of these disciplines has sacrificed. While it may not have succeeded, it has perhaps suggested how the church must feel free to pursue faith inquiry that may not conform to the methodologies of secular disciplines that do not posit the existence of God.

Finally, this study has suggested that the church may look forward to continuing divisions over matters that ultimately relate to the gospel. Oddly, those who divide may ultimately affirm the same gospel. This one phenomenon represents both the tragedy and the glory of the church. The tragedy appears when Christians cannot recognize Christ in others whose faith arises from a different experience of the gospel. The glory appears in the gospel's continuing power to reveal Jesus Christ as the Savior and to draw people into the church, which is constantly finding a way to renew itself for new generations.