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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Mar., 1939), pp. 1-13

Published by: [The Society of Biblical Literature](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3259351>

Accessed: 09/04/2012 11:17

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THE PRIMITIVE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE*

WILLIAM H. P. HATCH

EPISCOPAL THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL

WHAT was the character of the primitive Christian message? This is a question of great importance from several points of view. It is important historically and theologically and practically. The historian of Western civilization, whatever his personal beliefs and feelings may be, is obliged to study and appraise a movement which, over a period of nearly two thousand years, has probably affected that civilization more profoundly than any other single force. It has left its mark everywhere in the West — not only on literature and all the arts, but also on the thoughts and actions and lives of men. And no movement in history is intelligible without some knowledge of its beginnings. The greatness of Rome cannot be really understood or appreciated unless one knows something about the legendary settlement of Romulus and Remus beside the Tiber.

The theologian also is interested in the primitive Christian *κήρυγμα* quite as much as the historian. For he, too, in order to understand the great doctrines of Christianity and their relative importance, must know what ideas were included in the original Christian message. Without this knowledge the development of Christian thought is unintelligible. No living thing ever wholly outgrows or transcends the earliest stage of its life. The botanist must study the seed in order to understand fully the plant and the flower.

*The Presidential address delivered at the meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, December 28, 1938, at Union Theological Seminary, New York City.

So, too, the practical man, who is neither an historian nor a theologian, wishes to learn something about the earliest phase of his religion. How and why did it get its start? He may be moved by mere curiosity, or he may have some purely personal motive; but in any case he wants to know something about it, just as he desires some knowledge of geology and astronomy.

Where then shall we look for knowledge of the content and character of the primitive Christian message? Evidence derived from contemporary non-Christian sources is so scanty that only two courses are open to us in our quest. (a) We may ask the Church herself to tell us something about her infancy. But in this case we shall certainly get a confused and uncertain account of Christian beginnings. (b) We may with greater profit turn to the New Testament, which contains along with later material the earliest Christian literature that is still extant. But it will be necessary for us to separate between the earlier and the later, to proceed cautiously, and to employ sound principles of criticism.

Ferdinand Christian Baur, a professor in the University of Tübingen, was once a dominant figure in biblical and historical criticism and in theology. Though his influence has waned with the passage of time, Professor Henry S. Nash of Cambridge has said of him: "One thing is certain: New Testament study, since his time, has had a different colour."¹ Baur himself was hampered and his work vitiated in the judgment of later generations by his Hegelian interpretation of early Christian history, but he was nevertheless a scholar of clear and penetrating insight. We shall often do well if we take his words to heart, at least as a starting point for our own thinking. Baur held that the Christian movement, full of new life, strong and vigorous, surged forward on its way, and as it went it projected out of itself the New Testament and the Church. In other words they were both the products of the movement, and they were both equally inevitable. There is obviously much truth in this idea.

¹ Cf. H. S. Nash, *The History of the Higher Criticism of the New Testament*, New York, 1900, 131 f.

But just as the Christian movement antedated and produced both the New Testament and the Church, so something else preceded the Christian movement, if we do not limit the latter solely to the teaching of Jesus. That something was the preaching of the early Christian missionaries, who were known as apostles, i. e. persons entrusted with a mission and sent forth to proclaim it publicly. Their preaching (*κήρυγμα*) gave rise to the Christian movement, and all the rest followed naturally in the course of time. It was because certain early believers went out and made known far and wide the message of salvation in Jesus Christ that Christian communities sprang up here and there throughout the Mediterranean world. For the same reason the Epistles and Gospels and Acts, which were later to be gathered together to form the New Testament, were written and published. The primitive Christian *κήρυγμα* was the *fons et origo* both of the Church and of the New Testament. Without it neither would have come into being; but once the missionaries, preaching was given, the literature and the institution were both inevitable. Without these as conserving agents the message of salvation in Jesus Christ would have been soon forgotten; and the inaugurator of the movement would have been remembered, if at all, only as a liberal Galilean rabbi whose teachings were distinguished by a high ethical and religious quality. But the *κήρυγμα* and what resulted from it made him the founder of a religion.

The First Evangelist recognized clearly the supreme importance of the missionaries' preaching. According to Matthew Jesus appeared to his eleven faithful followers in Galilee and commanded them, saying, "Go ye therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."² This injunction is put into

² Matt 28 19. According to Luke and the Acts the disciples' task was to bear witness, and for this work they were to be endued with the Holy Spirit. Although scriptural warrant for the preaching of repentance for the remission of sins to all the nations in the Messiah's name is alleged, the disciples are not expressly commanded to preach the gospel or to baptize. (Luke 24 46 ff. and Acts 1 8).

the short period which intervened between the resurrection and the ascension, and certainly no more effective position could have been found for it. So, too, in the longer of the two spurious endings of the Gospel of Mark the risen Jesus bids the Eleven to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to all the creation."³ The gospel is here conceived as a means of salvation. He who receives it and is baptized will be saved, but he who ignores or rejects it will suffer divine condemnation. Finally, in the shorter of the spurious endings of Mark it is said that "Jesus sent forth from the east even unto the west through them (i. e. his disciples) the sacred and incorruptible preaching (*κήρυγμα*) of eternal salvation."⁴ This event is understood to have taken place after the resurrection and before the ascension. All these passages reflect the ideas and background of the apostolic mission so clearly that there can be no doubt about their origin. They testify to the fact that soon after the death of Jesus his followers went out and preached the message of salvation in Jesus Christ to all who would listen to them, and they believed that they were commissioned for this work by the risen Lord himself. In other words what actually happened is stated as a dominical command.

What was the content of this earliest Christian preaching? But before we attempt to answer this question we must ask another. Where is the subject-matter of the *κήρυγμα* to be found? It is contained chiefly in the first half of the Acts, in certain earlier epistles of the Apostle Paul, in First Peter, and here and there in the gospels.

It has long been recognized that the theology of the first part of the Acts is primitive. This is doubtless due to the fact that it is based on an early source or sources, which the present writer believes to have been Aramaic. The Apostle Paul sometimes incorporates in his epistles ideas which he received from persons who were believers in Christ before he himself was converted. Of this he makes no secret. Although First Peter was probably

³ Cf. Mark 16 15.

⁴ See B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, London, 1907, 113.

written near the end of the reign of Domitian (81–96 A.D.), it contains much primitive matter. It is the work of a Paulinist who knew and believed the earlier teachings and wished to impress them upon his readers. This accounts for the resemblances which have sometimes been pointed out between this epistle and the speeches of Peter found in the Acts. Finally, some phrases and ideas are imbedded in the gospels which seem to have been derived from the preaching of the early Christian missionaries. But there are surprisingly few of them in view of what Form Criticism has taught us concerning the formation of the synoptic gospels. These then are the principal sources in which the primitive Christian *κήρυγμα* has been preserved.

However, it must not be imagined that the beginnings were entirely forgotten or completely outgrown in later times. A healthy religion grows and develops from within and from without, but its essential character abides. Old ideas underwent change, new views were adopted, and emphases were shifted; but the fundamental and distinctive message was never lost. Hence traces of the primitive *κήρυγμα* appear sporadically even in the later books of the New Testament.

Jesus died an ignominious death on the cross. At first the disciples were stunned by the blow, but they soon perceived that a catastrophe so appalling could be understood only as of God's ordering. It all happened "by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God."⁵ Indeed, it was just what He had foreordained from eternity should occur.⁶ Moreover, Jesus' death was not meaningless or ineffective. On the contrary it had great and lasting significance; for it was sacrificial, and by it sin was done away. He was held to be "the lamb of God, which (by his death) taketh away the sin of the world."⁷ Paul also calls him "our paschal lamb"; and he mentions the fact that he has been sacrificed, so that his death has actually taken away the sins of believers.⁸

⁵ Cf. Acts 2 23.

⁶ Cf. Acts 4 28.

⁷ Cf. John 1 29. Cf. also John 1 36.

⁸ Cf. 1 Cor 5 7.

Hence the tragedy of Calvary by no means put an end to the movement which had been inaugurated by Jesus. On the contrary it gained thereby new life and power. For soon after the death of their leader the disciples became firmly convinced that he was still living. God had loosed the cords of death and raised him from Sheol.⁹ It was even said that he had appeared not only to the leading believers but also to more than five hundred brethren at one time.¹⁰ This conviction, based (as they believed) on the testimony of sight and confirmed by the Scriptures, was at once the foundation on which their faith rested and the basis of their preaching. "And if Christ hath not been raised, then is our preaching (*κήρυγμα*) vain (*κενόν*), vain (*κενή*) also is your faith, and we are found to be also false witnesses of God, because we have witnessed against God that He raised up the Messiah."¹¹ "And if Christ hath not been raised, your faith is vain (*ματαία*)."¹² In other words the missionaries' message depended for its validity on the resurrection of Jesus viewed as an act of God, and this event was one of the basic elements in their preaching.

It was also believed that Jesus, having been raised from the dead, had been exalted to heaven by the power of God.¹³ Thence, in accordance with ancient prophecy, the Spirit was poured out upon believers, thus producing the strange phenomena which were seen in the various Christian communities.¹⁴ In these mighty acts the hand of Deity was manifest. Jesus was still living, and he would soon return to the earth and establish his reign with power and glory.¹⁵ This hope was fostered and kept alive by the early Christian watchword *maranatha*, which circulated in Greek-speaking as well as in Aramaic-speaking circles.¹⁶ The fact that it was in a strange language and was doubtless

⁹ Cf. Acts 2 24.

¹⁰ Cf. 1 Cor 15 3 ff.

¹¹ Cf. 1 Cor 15 14 f.

¹² Cf. 1 Cor 15 17.

¹³ Cf. Acts 2 33 and 5 31.

¹⁴ Cf. Acts 2 16 ff.

¹⁵ Cf. Acts 3 20.

¹⁶ Cf. 1 Cor 16 22. Cf. also Apoc 22 20.

known to have been handed down from the Palestinian community made it especially impressive. The idea that Jesus had been exalted to heaven and would soon return to the earth, which was complementary to that of his resurrection, also formed part of the primitive Christian *κήρυγμα*.

Jesus' resurrection convinced his disciples that God had made him both Lord and Messiah.¹⁷ Paul says that he was designated the Son of God with power by his resurrection from the dead.¹⁸ In other words Jesus was Messiah and Lord not by virtue of birth or descent, but by divine appointment. As Messiah he was the fulfillment of God's promise made to his people through the prophets and the inaugurator of the Messianic kingdom on earth. As Lord he was the bearer of supreme authority, and he actually exercised this authority in the lives of believers. How the authority of Jesus and that of God were related to each other was one of the questions which were necessarily left for a later generation to solve. It was probably not a pressing problem in the early period, because the Messiah was expected to return very soon to the earth and set up his kingdom. Paul, being a strict monotheist, had sensed the difficulty involved in ascribing supreme authority to Christ; and he had found a possible solution of the problem. "And when all things have been subjected unto him (i. e. Christ), then shall the Son also himself be subjected (*or* subject himself) unto him who subjected all things unto him, that God may be all in all."¹⁹

Messiahship was a Jewish category, and its appeal was primarily to members of the Jewish race. It was the highest dignity that could be ascribed to a human being, but it did not imply or connote divinity. The word Messiah was meaningless to Gentiles and had to be translated and explained to them. It became a proper name rather than a title at an early date, and as such it has survived. Lordship on the other hand was a familiar idea in hellenistic as well as in Semitic quarters. The divinities worshipped in the mystery cults of the Graeco-Roman

¹⁷ Cf. Acts 2 36.

¹⁸ Cf. Rom 1 4.

¹⁹ Cf. 1 Cor 15 28.

world had the title Lord or Lady, and each of them was supreme in the life of his or her devotees. When Jesus was called Lord by believers, this title could not have seemed new or strange to many people in Ephesus or Corinth. Indeed, it must have had an old and familiar sound, and it must have suggested ideas which were well known to them in their own religious life.

Jesus was proclaimed by the early Christian preachers not only as Messiah and Lord but also as Savior, and this was likewise a term with which Gentile hearers were well acquainted. The idea was nothing new or startling. It was indeed just what many of them had been seeking, and to these the announcement of a saviour was welcome news. The missionaries declared that God, having raised Jesus from the dead, exalted him to heaven to be the leader and savior of all those who believe.²⁰ God, not man, was the prime mover in the great drama of salvation.

The first preachers were not much interested in the events of Jesus' life or even in his teachings, for he was not thought of primarily as an ethical teacher or a worker of miracles. Our canonical gospels tacitly testify to the fact that the early Christians' chief concern was with the death and resurrection of Jesus, for in all of them the story of the passion occupies a disproportionate amount of space.²¹ "The things either said or done by Christ," to borrow a phrase from Papias, were matters of interest to a somewhat later generation. In this period Jesus' sayings were collected and anecdotes about him were committed to writing. These were the materials which the evangelists used as sources.

Why did God do the above-mentioned mighty acts? Why did He raise Jesus from the dead and exalt him to heaven? Why did He make him Messiah and Lord and Savior? The answer to these questions is suggested by the title Savior. All these things were done solely in order that by means of them men might be saved. For they were in dire need of salvation from various evils — from sin, from the demons, and from death.

²⁰ Cf. Acts 5 30 f.

²¹ In Matthew the passion occupies a little less than one-seventh of the whole gospel, in Mark (not including the last twelve verses) about one-sixth, and in Luke about one-seventh.

They were perishing in their sins, and many of them felt the need of salvation and longed for a savior. Then along came the Christian missionaries with the announcement that God had provided salvation for men in and through Jesus, who was Messiah and Lord and Savior. He had died on a cross at the hands of men, and then he had been raised from the dead and exalted to heaven by God. His death was redemptive, for he "came . . . to give his life as a ransom (λύτρον) for many."²² Jesus' resurrection from the dead and exaltation to heaven set the seal of divine approval upon his work.

To obtain the proffered salvation, one thing only was necessary, and that was faith. "This is the word of faith which we preach: that if thou confess the word with thy mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe with thy heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."²³ But faith was not merely intellectual assent to the missionaries' message or even acceptance of it. Paul understood faith as "at once belief, trust, and loyalty — the means whereby the believer receives the Spirit, and enters into and continues in mystical fellowship with Christ."²⁴ It was, moreover, a divine gift. Being in Christ by virtue of his faith, the believer experienced all the blessings of salvation.

Two religious rites, baptism and the Lord's Supper, accompanied the missionaries' message of salvation and formed part of it. The former signified repentance and remission of sins, and at the same time it signaled the believer's entrance into the Christian community. The Lord's Supper (δέιπνον κυριακόν) was a memorial and symbolical meal. By its frequent recurrence it kept continually in mind Jesus' sacrificial and redemptive death on the cross; and it symbolized the new covenant, which was sealed with his blood. But it was more than this. According to Paul those who ate the bread and drank of the cup through this act had mystical fellowship with Christ.

²² Cf. Mark 10 45.

²³ Cf. Rom 10 8 f.

²⁴ Cf. W. H. P. Hatch, *The Pauline Idea of Faith*, Cambridge, Mass., 1917, 65.

The various terms by which the missionaries' message was designated are significant. It was "called 'the word of God' or 'the gospel of God,' and 'the word of Christ' and 'the gospel of Christ.' Paul also speaks of it as 'the word of the cross,' 'the word of reconciliation,' 'the word of truth,' and 'the word of life.'"²⁵ In other words the primitive Christian *κῆρυγμα* was regarded as the utterance of God or Christ. Like the Hebrew prophets of old, the preachers were merely the instruments or channels through which the divine message was communicated to man. The expressions quoted above also show that the essential character of the missionaries' preaching was soteriological. It is aptly described by the author of the Epistle to the Ephesians as "the gospel of salvation."²⁶

What shall we say about the character of the early Christian *κῆρυγμα*? The missionaries did not proclaim far and wide the Kingdom of God, or humanitarianism, or social amelioration, or even a more just social order. They did not preach the high ethical principles which are found in the Sermon on the Mount and in the parables of Jesus, nor did they recount the miracles or mighty works which are recorded in the gospels as proof of Jesus' divine mission. The interest in his teachings and miracles came later. The missionaries' preaching was of an entirely different sort, for it was primarily soteriological. The gospel, as they understood it, was God's message of salvation in Jesus Christ; and it was their duty as God's heralds to announce it. In God's name they offered salvation to the world and presented to their hearers a savior. Paul says that this message was "a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles";²⁷ but that mattered little, for "it pleased God to save those who believed through the foolishness of the preaching (*τὸ κῆρυγμα*)."²⁸ By faith and sacrament the salvation proffered by the preachers could be received and become effective.

²⁵ Cf. W. H. P. Hatch, *op. cit.*, 33 f.

²⁶ Cf. Eph 1 13.

²⁷ Cf. 1 Cor 1 23.

²⁸ Cf. 1 Cor 1 21.

The soteriological message, however, was by no means the only concern of the Christian missionaries. They were also vitally interested in morals, and a moral life was looked upon as evidence that one possessed the divine Spirit. Like the Stoic and Cynic preachers, they extolled and commended virtue and denounced vice. The result was amendment of life and a higher standard of living in the Christian communities. Converts from the Gentile world must have sensed keenly the difference in moral tone between their old background and their new environment.

We ordinarily think of the Greeks as a joyous and happy people. But there was gloom as well as joy in their civilization. A dark shadow is cast across the pages of Greek literature from the time of Homer onwards by the thought of death, which seemed to be the inexorable and ineluctable foe of all that is fair and good. This feeling was especially strong in the Hellenistic Age, and there are traces of it in the New Testament. Thus the Apostle Paul exclaims: "Wretched man am I! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"²⁹

Along with this revulsion at death went a strong yearning for salvation (*σωτηρία*) — deliverance from various evils in this life and bliss beyond the grave. Dr. Angus says: "The cry for salvation was loud, persistent, and universal."³⁰ Professors Macgregor and Purdy speak of "that universal longing for 'salvation' wherein we shall find the prime *Praeparatio Evangelica* of the Hellenistic Age."³¹ Men and women longed to be saved and were seeking earnestly for a savior. Many prayers and vows for *σωτηρία* engraved on stone are extant, and they testify eloquently to the aspirations of those who set up the monuments. No doubt in many cases these people were thinking primarily of safety, health, and worldly prosperity; but there was often

²⁹ Cf. Rom 7 24.

³⁰ Cf. S. Angus, *The Mystery-Religions and Christianity*, New York, 1925, 226.

³¹ Cf. G. H. C. Macgregor and A. C. Purdy, *Jew and Greek Tutors unto Christ*, London, 1936, 232.

something more than these in their minds. Sir William Ramsay says: "There lies latent in it (i. e. the word *σωτηρια*) some undefined and hardly conscious thought of the spiritual and the moral."³²

In the hellenistic period the old state religions had almost completely lost their influence. They were only obsolete survivals of an ancient past, and nobody any longer really believed in them. Men and women in considerable numbers were turning to the mystery cults, most of which were of Oriental origin. There were several important mysteries — the Eleusinian, the Phrygian, the Syrian, the Egyptian, and the Persian. They differed from one another in various ways; but they were all sacramental and soteriological, and membership in them was voluntary. They promised salvation to those who were initiated into them — a life of happiness after death. This promise, however empty it may seem to us, appealed strongly to many in the first century of our era; and the mystery religions made many converts. At least it can be said that these cults gave the hope of a happy future to people who otherwise would have been without it. They must also have tended to raise the moral tone of the lives of their votaries by fixing the thoughts of the latter on a life to come.

Both the mystery cults and early Christianity offered to the hellenistic world just that for which many people in that age were yearning, viz. salvation. All these religions were soteriological, but a profound difference separated early Christianity from its rivals. In the latter the chief emphasis was put upon initiation, ceremonies, and sacramental rites of a magical character; whereas in the former admission into the community and salvation depended in the last analysis upon faith. This difference is fundamental and far-reaching, and the recognition of it is of prime importance.

Early Christianity had another great advantage over its competitors. Demeter, Cybele, Atargatis, Osiris, Isis, and Mithra

³² Cf. Sir W. M. Ramsay, *The Teaching of Paul in Terms of the Present Day*, second ed., London, 1914, 94 f. See also the same writer's *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, London, 1915, 173 ff.

were mythical divinities. Jesus on the contrary was an historical person, and the religion which claimed him as its founder was firmly rooted in history. In the long run the historical is sure to triumph over the mythical.

Edward Gibbon, in a well-known chapter of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*,³³ enumerates five causes to which he attributes the rapid growth of Christianity in the Graeco-Roman world. The second of these causes is the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. In Gibbon's time ancient life and thought were known almost exclusively from literary sources. We on the other hand have learned much from inscriptions and papyri about the life and religion of ordinary people in antiquity. In the light of this knowledge we should substitute the promise of salvation for the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Moreover, while recognizing that there were other reasons for the rapid spread of Christianity among Gentiles in the first century of our era, we should put the promise of salvation first and foremost. This was the essence of the primitive Christian message, and it was this more than anything else that attracted men and women to the new religion in great numbers. They believed and were baptized, and thereby they became members of the Christian community.

³³ Chapter XV.