

THE UNIVERSAL GOSPEL PREACHED BY THE APOSTLES

At the first session of this seminar, I said: "There is a universalism that belongs to "Adamic" religion and there is a very different kind of universalism that belongs to "Abrahamic" religion." Adamic religion has been described as a universal human trait which is found everywhere among the descendents of Adam. In Abrahamic religion, the start-point is revelation. Revelation, in the Biblical sense, is something "basically different from religious intuition or divination and...is not a product of the human religious consciousness. [Revelation] enters history in the form of sovereign divine words and acts...it is divine self-disclosure, issuing from divine initiative...There is no such thing as revelation-in-itself because revelation consists always in the fact that something is revealed to me. Revelation is not a thing, but an act of God, an event involving two parties; it is personal address."(1)

In Adamic religion, it is the general Idea of Religion with its generally accepted truths that furnish the basis for a concept of universal religion. But in Abrahamic religion, there is no generally accepted system of propositional truths that furnish a standard by which the Christian revelation can be measured and evaluated. In Abrahamic religion, it is the word of the Creator who is faithful to his promises that gives us assurance that it is God's intention to extend his universal blessing to all nations. In Christian faith and experience, revelation "means something fundamentally different from an individually unique expression of the universal essence of religion."(2) "God has set a goal for history and he will bring to a conclusion what he has begun in history and he will put an end to that which opposes this conclusion."(3)

So, Adamic religion is a "mode of human life" while Abrahamic religion is the "self-disclosure of God."(4)

Our concern here today is the universal gospel preached by the Apostles. In this regard, one question that calls for an answer is: Did Jesus think of himself as the founder of a new "religion," and did the Apostles think of themselves as the founding fathers of a new "religion?" The New Testament says that: "Christ and the Christian movement are not just a religious phenomenon like the various sects of Judaism or the cults of the Hellenistic world with their various doctrines and techniques of spiritual discipline." (5)

"For the writers of the New Testament, Jesus is not merely a 'religious' figure and the Christian church is not merely a 'religious' community."(6) The Apostles did not regard Jesus as a "virtuoso in divine science;"(7) and they did not believe that God had sent Jesus into the world in

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order that he might "make a contribution to the religious storehouse of mankind." (8)

So then, if the Christian revelation is not related to all religions "as an individual to other religions of the same species," (9) then to what is it related?

The New Testament writers see Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfiller of all that was promised and prophesied concerning the "Coming One" in the Old Testament. In the Book of Acts (7:1-52), Stephen summarizes the history of Israel beginning with Abraham and bringing the story down to the "coming of the Righteous One." In Hebrews (1:1-2), we are told that: "God who at sundry times and divers manners spake in times past to the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." And Jesus himself, in a post-resurrection encounter with two disciples, admonished them as "slow of heart to believe," and "expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself," -- "beginning at Moses and all the prophets." (Luke 24:25-27)

In "the early apostolic witness [it is] clear that God's action in Christ was the climax of a whole history of his dealings with his people." (10)

"[The] final fulfillment of the promises in the Old Testament in the coming and work of Christ can only be understood as a fulfillment of the entire way of the promise through the Old Testament; [and] as a fulfillment of the history of the promises. The whole history, in its variety and multiformity, comes to final fulfillment in the event reported in the New Testament." (11)

It is important to take note here that Jesus of Nazareth is not the fulfiller of God's revelation to his Old Covenant people merely because his coming matches certain particular predictions in the Old Testament (even though some New Testament writers are interested in this kind of prediction). Jesus has a more profound relation to the Old Testament than can be seen by simply comparing the events of his coming with certain Old Testament predictions.

In his important book, Jesus and the Old Testament, R. T. France declares that, in Jesus "the age of fulfillment has come...All God's working in the Old Testament is now reaching its culmination, and the Old Testament economy is at an end. The new Messianic age has dawned...The glorious fulfillment to which the Old Testament looked forward has come..."

Thus Jesus saw his mission as the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures; not just of those which predicted a coming redeemer, but the whole sweep of Old Testament ideas. The patterns of God's working which the discerning eye could trace in the institutions of Israel were all preparing for the great climax when all would be taken up

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into the final and perfect act of God which the prophets foretold. And in the coming of Jesus all this was fulfilled. That was why he could find in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." (12)

The part of Israel's expectations that were fulfilled in Jesus Christ which is of special interest to us in this seminar, is the expectation that, at some future time, God's blessing and favor would be extended to all of the uncovenanted nations; that is, to the Gentiles.

The prophet Isaiah prophesied that: "there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots..."

And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand as an ensign [or banner] of the people; to it shall the gentiles seek,...

And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth." (Isaiah 11:1,10,12).

Since Jesse was David's father, this prophecy signified that a Messianic figure of Davidic descent would appear at some future time and that the nations would rally to his banner. Although the word "ensign" does not occur in the New Testament, these verses from Isaiah are applied to Christ by Paul (Romans 15:12) and the author of Hebrews (12:5), and there are other allusions in Revelation such as: "I am the root and offspring of David" (Rev. 22:16 & 5:5).

Luke gives us an account of Jesus' early ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth when he stood up and read from the prophet Isaiah the passage which begins: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor," and concludes with the words: "To preach the acceptable year of the Lord" (Isaiah 61:1). When Jesus had concluded this reading, he announced: "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:18-21).

But Jesus had made a significant omission in his reading from Isaiah. When he read: "To preach the acceptable year of the Lord," he left out the last part of this sentence, "and the day of vengeance of our God." Jesus had announced the coming of the Messianic age, but had "removed vengeance on the Gentiles from the picture of the future." (13) On this occasion, Jesus underscored this intentional inclusion of the Gentiles in the day of universal salvation by retelling two stories from First and Second Kings, which relate how, in times when the Israelites were in dire need because of famine and pestilence, God had showed his mercy and healing power to two non-Jews, Sarepta and Naaman.

In the story of Jesus cleansing of the Temple, it is of special significance that it was actually the court of the Gentiles that Jesus cleansed. It is possible to see that in cleansing the Temple, Jesus was performing a parabolic act -- that is to say, that by his action in this episode he is telling us that the time has come when the Gentiles -- the uncovenanted nations -- are to become fully included in the holy people of God. The two quotations that Jesus adduces from Isaiah and Jeremiah as the basis of his action both refer to God's concern for all nations. (Is.56:7, Jer.7:11)

Again, Jesus' symbolic entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey has its Old Testament roots in the writings of the prophet Zechariah who wrote of a king who would be humble and not war-like, and of whom he said that: "he will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off; and he shall speak peace to the nations: and his dominion shall be from sea to sea..." (Zech.9:9-10)

We have been examining some of the ways in which the written promises and prophecies of the Old Testament are seen to be fulfilled in the New Testament by the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. But, as we noted earlier, in addition to the written prophecies, there are also events and institutions in the Old Testament that point to Christ. Robert Rendall says that: "prophecy in the strict sense is confined to the spoken or written word, but are not the types and shadows of the law themselves prophecies 'of good things to come' that had their fulfillment in Christ...? The importance of Bible prophecy lies in the fact that it lifts history from the plane of natural evolution and shows it to be an ordered scheme of events grounded in the divine will" (14) (emphasis mine).

Alan Richardson offers further clarification concerning "typology." He says that nowadays the "fulfillment of prophecy is...seen to involve more than the fulfillment of words and predictions; it involves the fulfillment of history, [it is] the validation of the prophetic understanding of history in the events which the New Testament records and interprets...The classical Christian attitude has always been that history itself is prophetic: the course of historical events, and not merely the words of the prophets, contains an anticipation or foreshadowing of that which is to come...[and so the] events of New Testament history may be described as the fulfillment of the Old Testament types. Typological interpretation of the biblical history is thus based upon the actual course of that history as recorded and interpreted by the prophetic and apostolic witness...Accordingly the idea of fulfillment of the Scriptures will mean for us the fulfillment of history,

[that is,] the making explicit that which was implicit in the pattern of earlier historical events by the denouement of later events...This is essentially the way in which the New Testament writers understand the Old Testament."(15)

This is also the way that George Fox understood the relation of the Old Testament to the New Testament (as we shall see at the next session of this seminar). I have compiled a table of "types, figures and shadows" which Fox claimed were ended and abolished when Jesus came because he is the substance and these things are the shadows.

So the universal gospel that was preached by the Apostles was a proclamation that all that was prefigured, typified, and foreshadowed concerning the "coming one" is fulfilled and consummated in Jesus Christ who is the substance. Because Jesus of Nazareth is the substance of all that was promised, prophesied, and foreshadowed in the Old Testament, it is through faith in him that all the nations may receive the universal blessing which God promised to Abraham when he said: "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice." (Gen. 22:18)

In his excellent essay, "The Reasonableness of Typology," G. W. H. Lampe says: "It is impossible to make sense of the gospel narratives or of the apostolic preaching ...unless we accept the view that Jesus himself envisaged his mission in terms of Old Testament prophecy and typology, and that he deliberately fulfilled the role which the history of the Covenant People and the spiritual insight of its prophets had revealed at sundry times and in divers manners as having been laid down by the will of God for man's salvation... [The] picture that St. Luke presents to us, of the risen Christ beginning from Moses and all the prophets to expound to his followers in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself, must represent, in large measure, the truth of the matter. Christ must surely have believed himself to be the fulfillment of God's dealings with his ancient people, and his disciples must have learnt that truth from him. If we admit the unity of Scripture in the sense that it is the literature of a people whose thought was controlled by a single series of images, and that it is a body of writings whose ...theme...is the people and the covenant, and if...we hold that Christ is the unifying center-point of Biblical history, deliberately fulfilling the various images presented by that literature and bringing together different threads within it to form a consistent pattern, then we can have no objection to... typology..."(16)

In the matter of language and imagery, the dependence of the New Testament on the Old Testament cannot be empha-

sized too strongly. There are 1368 passages and phrases from the Old Testament that are quoted in the New Testament. In the New Testament Moses is mentioned 74 times and Abraham 72 times. In the Book of Revelation alone there are no fewer than 499 references and allusions to the Old Testament.(17) Paul says: "The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ" (Gal 3:24), and Robert Rendell states that: "In the very necessity of things the grammar of redemption had to be taught to man before he was fitted to receive the full revelation of God's love in Christ... The full impact on human sensibility of the coming of Christ, if it had not been preceded by preparatory intimations, would have been as baffling as putting a book written in Chinese into the hands of an Eskimo."(18)

We cannot be reminded too often how important it is "to see that the New Testament, where the consciousness of the newness of the Messianic age is so central,...is never the less dependent upon the Old Testament for its categories of newness,"(19) i.e. a new worship, a new community, a new ministry, a new church order.

R. T. France points out that: "If in the Old Testament God worked through prophets, priests, and kings, then Jesus could point to all three as types of himself. If in the Old Testament God chose out a people to whom he made promises of blessing, then Jesus could claim that in himself and his disciples...those promises would find fulfillment. Jesus understood [that] the Old Testament...in its essential principles, and even in its details...foreshadows the Messiah that it promises. The whole theological system of the Old Testament points forward to his work, and in his coming the whole Old Testament economy finds its perfection and its fulfillment."(20)

So, the coming of Christ is the consummation of God's self-revelation that began with Abraham and continued through Moses and the prophets. The God who revealed himself through prophets, priests, and kings in the Old Covenant now draws near to us in personal encounter through his Son, Jesus Christ, whom he has anointed to be unto us his New Covenant prophet, priest, and king -- the same yesterday, today, and forever.

The universal gospel preached by the Apostles is a proclamation that the prophecies are fulfilled -- the new age has begun -- the long-awaited Messiah has come. One classic example of apostolic preaching is Peter's declaration to the Jews in which he tells them that in Christ, God has fulfilled all that he foretold by the mouths of all the prophets. He reminds his hearers of the prophetic words of Moses, that the Lord will raise up a prophet from your brethren as he raised me up. You shall listen to him what-

ever he tells you...And all the prophets who have spoken from Samuel and those who came afterwards, also proclaimed these days. You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God gave to your fathers, saying to Abraham, "And in your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed." God having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you in turning everyone of you from his wickedness" (Acts 3:18-26).

The New Age or New Day of Christ that the Apostles were bringing in by their gospel preaching differed radically from the old order in two ways: First, it is a time of good news for the inhabitants of the earth. Second, the new era brings with it through Christ a new and living way to God without any of the paraphernalia of cultic religion, (that is to say, of Adamic religion). It has been said that the religion of Christ "stood among the ancient faiths as a strange and extraordinary thing, a priestless religion, without symbols, sacrifices, officials, hitherto, save by prophetic Hebraism, held to be the [all in all of religion]." (21)

These two features of the apostolic community and its preaching were the cause of most of the hostility toward the primitive Christians. In the course of Christian history both of these things ceased to be distinguishing features of the church of Christ.

George Fox and the early Quakers claimed that they had recovered and were preaching again the everlasting gospel preached by the Apostles and the early church. By the preaching of this gospel they believed that they were restoring both the universality and the religionless Christianity that were marks of the primitive church.

At the next session of this seminar, on November 3, we will be focusing attention on the universal gospel preached by the early Quakers. In preparation for next month's session, I suggest and recommend that you all read the two versions of George Fox's sermon on Firbank Fell which are available here today.

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