PARALLEL GUIDE 7
The Pattern of Proclamation

Summary

The pattern of proclamation in the New Testament differs in various documents. Yet a consistency exists whether you look at the Four Gospels, the Epistles of Paul or Peter, or the literature associated with John. This chapter relies upon and offers a critique of the work of C. H. Dodd concerning the similarities and differences in various portions of the New Testament proclamation.

Learning Objectives

• Learn the difference between kerygma (proclamation) and didache (teaching)

• Learn how we might tell what comes from an early tradition

• Learn C. H. Dodd's point of view and the critique of that stance that others have offered

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Write a paragraph in your own words that expresses the central proclamation of the New Testament.

2. How would you express that proclamation today? How would that be different if you were addressing the following groups: grade-school children, residents of a nursing home, coworkers, bystanders in a public park (like Hyde Park, London), a group of fundamentalists, Muslims, Hindus, animists, or Buddhists?

Preparing for Your Seminar

Come to your seminar ready to articulate your version of the New Testament proclamation. What will you say differently in the context of your EfM group from what you might say at work or in church?

Works Cited

Rudolf Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, Kendrick Grobel, trans. (London: SCM Press, 1952-1955).

C. H. Dodd, The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936).

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Rowan Williams, Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1982).

Chapter 7
THE PATTERN OF PROCLAMATION

C. H. Dodd* and an Original Gospel

In books and articles published just before the Second World War, and most notably in two books called *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (1936) and *History and the Gospel* (1938), the eminent New Testament scholar C. H. Dodd made a series of points about the shape and direction of the documents that comprise the New Testament.

Dodd was well aware that the New Testament is no more a systematic theological statement than the Old. When we ask questions about the life and teaching of Jesus and about the early church, our answers must be gathered from documents that reveal, often in a quite haphazard way, conditions they largely take for granted. Nevertheless, much can be gleaned from them. Paul's letters, intended to guide early Christian congregations, are the earliest of these documents. They reveal to us an outstanding leader, missionary, and teacher. Yet for all Paul's evident genius, it does not appear that his letters were composed by a charismatic figure who felt free to think and act as he pleased. The same is true of the other writers of the New Testament. Despite their individuality they expressly or implicitly relate themselves to a central core of tradition and belief.

While Paul is careful to guard and claim his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ, he is also careful to make clear that there is no division between him and other leaders of the church. He separates himself from those who would make him the leader of a party or sect. He is very clear that there is no religion—or at least none encouraged by him—that can be called "Paulinism." He distinguishes the "foundation" that has already been laid, which is Jesus Christ, from whatever anyone "builds" on that foundation (1 Cor. 3:10-15). He more than once emphasizes that he "delivered" to the Corinthians what he had "received" (1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3). The Greek words that he uses (paradidōmi, "deliver"; paralambanō, "receive") had been used in ancient Greece to describe the handing on of sacred traditions, and correspond precisely to technical terms for the handing on of such tradition in rabbinic Hebrew (qibbel, "receive"; masar, "hand on"). After a summary of the apostolic faith, Paul observes that "whether then it was I or they [i.e., whether it was he or other Christian apostles], so we proclaim and so you have come to believe" (1 Cor. 15:11).

The writer to the Hebrews scorns to teach again elementary doctrines that are the "foundation" (Heb. 6:1) and that, presumably, he expects to be taken for granted. The author of 1 John emphasizes that he is writing "the message you have heard from the beginning" (1 John 3:11; cf. 2:7).

Proclamation (kerygma) and Teaching (didache)

Dodd suggested that the foundation on which these writers build consists, broadly, of two elements. One of these is usually referred to by New Testament scholars as the kerygma, a Greek word meaning "proclamation" or "preaching." It has a verbal form, kerrussō, meaning "proclaim" or "preach," and is in origin a word used to

describe the action of a herald. The other part of the foundation is referred to as didachē which means "teaching." In the Scriptures, Dodd suggested, kerygma always comes before didachē; the basis for didachē is always kerygma.

In the Hebrew Scriptures and in Judaism generally, the life and purposes of the people center upon certain acts of God. God freely called Abraham to be founder of the nation. God graciously heard the people's grief in Egypt and delivered them by a mighty hand and outstretched arm. The same God called the prophets to witness and continues to be faithful. This God who calls, delivers, and is faithful is the God who invites and requires obedience. The narrative of the giving of the Torah on Sinai sets the matter out perfectly:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . . You shall have no other Gods before me . . . . (Exod. 20:2, 3)

The first words are kerygma—the proclamation. Those following are didachē—the teaching.

What is the proclamation, and what, essentially, is its content? It describes a mighty act that God has done for the people. It is fundamentally a story—or at least the essence of a story. It is a story that, if true, is good news.

After the giving of good news, the commandments are taught. They are offered as a way, the appropriate way, to respond to the good news. By attempting to obey, Israel confesses the Name of God and accepts God's covenant. This is the fundamental pattern of all Judaism. It remains, therefore, the pattern of Christianity.

Christianity, however, has a crucial addition. God has acted in a decisive new way in the life and mission of Jesus. At the beginning of Mark, in a passage that is programmatic for his Gospel, Jesus himself is shown reflecting both the continuity and the development: "The time is fulfilled [this among other things affirms what has gone before] and the kingdom of God has come near [this affirms that something new is happening]; repent, and believe in the good news [this is a call to respond that is clearly a consequence of the previous proclamation]" (Mark 1:15).

Jesus proclaimed God's kingdom; the church proclaimed Jesus. The German NT scholar Rudolf Bultmann wrote that when the church passed on the message of Jesus through its preaching, "he who had formerly been the bearer of the message was drawn into it and became its essential content. The proclaimer became the proclaimed" (1953, 33).

The proclamation of the NT is therefore "the Good News of Jesus Messiah (Greek: Christos, NRSV "Christ")" (Mark 1:1; cf. Rom. 1:6; 15:19; 1 Cor. 9:12; 2 Cor. 2:12, etc.).

The teaching of the NT is "the law [Greek: nomos = Hebrew: Torah] of the Messiah" or "the commandment of the Lord," i.e., Jesus (Gal. 6:2). The twofold pattern is maintained.

Like the call of Abraham and the narrative of the Book of Exodus, the New Testament proclamation is fundamentally a story. Consider the sermons attributed to Peter in Acts (2:14-40; 3:12-26; 10:34-43). While we may not be sure that these contain the actual words of the apostle on each occasion—apart from anything else, they would be rather short for that—Dodd thought that there were good reasons to suppose they preserved the kind of thing said by the first preachers of the message of Jesus. Not least of these reasons was the style. Luke can write good Greek when he chooses. If he does not, it is perhaps a sign that he feels bound by his original. The Greek in these passages is of poor quality, and nowhere in the NT do we have better reason to feel that we are dealing with direct and rather literal translation from Aramaic. This means that we are likely to be dealing with a very early Christian tradition.

Read through the Petrine proclamations one after the other, Dodd suggested, and you will gain the impression that, despite different arrangements and emphases, they contain common elements. These elements are parts of a story. The story is something like this:

1) The prophecies of scripture have been fulfilled, and the messianic age has come (Acts 2:16-21; 3:18, 22-25; 10:43).

2) Jesus of Nazareth, sent by God, came in the power of the Spirit, did mighty works, and taught with

authority (Acts 2:22; 10:38-39a).

3) He was crucified, died, and was buried (Acts 2:23; 10:39b).

4) God has raised him from the dead and exalted him as Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:24-36; 3:15b; 10:40-41).

5) Those who believe in him are marked as the true Israel by the gift of the Spirit, for forgiveness and salvation are offered in his name (Acts 2:33, 38-39; 3:19-26). According to the Book of Acts this is the proclamation to which in those first days the citizens of Jerusalem responded in large numbers (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:16; 6:7). What of the writings of Paul, certainly the earliest Christian literature we have? While Paul is not slow to assert his authority when necessary, he generally writes as one owing a duty to a central core of tradition. When he writes (1 Cor. 15:11) "so we proclaim and so you have come to believe," he makes this statement in connection with a passage where, particularly when we examine the Greek, it looks as though Paul were quoting both what had been taught to him and what he had handed on: For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received; that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:3-4)

The "quotation," with its clear statement about the death and resurrection of Jesus, sounds like something that would square well with the common tradition we have just outlined.

In the same letter, when discussing the Eucharist, Paul again begins by appealing to the tradition he "received,*" which he "also handed on" (1 Cor. 11:23). He goes on to present an account of the Last Supper similar, though not identical, to that in Mark. The events are set at a point in time—"the night when he was betrayed" (1 Cor. 11:23)—and later celebrations of the supper by the church are spoken of as ways of proclaiming "the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). It is evident that this passage also, with its clear appeal to received tradition, assumes the two most constant elements in the kerygma of the Book of Acts, the death and exaltation of Jesus.

In the opening to 1 Corinthians, Paul appears to sum up the proclamation in two words: "we proclaim" [not "I proclaim"] "a Messiah crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23, RSV alt.). In the letter to the Galatians he seems to be appealing to the basic proclamation that he had given them: "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified" (Gal. 3:1). In better spirits, he seems to remember an occasion of basic missionary work when he reminds the Thessalonians how they had welcomed him and "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming" (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

In his epistle to the Romans he speaks of "the word of faith that we proclaim" and appears once more to be summarizing its essentials when he goes on to say: "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9).

Whenever Paul insists on getting back to basic Christianity, we find reference to elements of the kerygma. These always include at least either the death or the resurrection of Jesus. Usually he refers to both.

We have reason to believe that Paul quotes in his letters preexisting Christian liturgical formulae. Such quotations are very interesting to us. They provide evidence of formulations of Christian faith that are as early as Paul's. They are not specifically his, but he obviously approved them. In the introduction to the letter to the Romans he appears to provide such a quotation when he speaks of the gospel concerning God's Son, "who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 1:3b-4).

Another passage believed to be pre-Pauline speaks of Jesus who was put to death for our trespasses, and raised for our justification (Rom. 4:25). In his letter to the Philippians, begging the Christians to be gentle with one another, Paul appears to quote a hymn, asking those to whom he wrote to have the same attitudes toward one another that they find in Christ Jesus, who

though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
2 (Phil. 2:6-11)

A characteristic of these passages, whether they are rather plain or, as in the case of the Philippians extract, highly poetic, is how well they coincide in their main elements with the story told in the kerygma passages of Acts. In particular we note that the death and resurrection of Jesus remain central and constant, that it is almost impossible to imagine the kerygma without them.

What of other NT letters? The presentation in 1 John of "the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you" (1:5) involves a passionate assertion of certain claims, namely,
that God is light and . . . if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. . . . If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.
(1 John 1:5, 7; 2:lb-2)

Later the writer presents what he seems to regard as fundamental for membership in the Christian community:

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.
(1 John 4:13-14)

The language is considerably different from that of Luke or Paul, but beneath the differences John's statements involve the main elements of the kerygma in the Book of Acts: Jesus has been sent by God; he died; he is exalted; he now avails for his people forgiveness and salvation; and they experience the gift of the Spirit.

The same basic story recurs in all four Gospels. Each of them can accurately be described as a greatly expanded version of the kerygma, filled out with details of the way in which Jesus came in fulfillment of prophecy, with details of his teaching and works, and with long accounts of the Passion and exaltation. Each, of course, does this in its own way, but each holds to the same basic pattern. This the Gospels themselves implicitly claim, for essentially they are narrative that is also proclamation (Mark 1:1; Matt. 1:1; Luke 1:1-4; John 1:1-18). So much, then, for the common pattern of NT proclamation.

What May We Say of the Teaching (didachē)?

The ethical teaching of the New Testament is not given in a body of precepts or in a system of virtue derived from first principles, as in the Greek philosophers (though there are traces of both). Its characteristic form is what we call by the Greek word parainesis ("exhortation"). It is important here to recall that this ethical teaching is always based on the theology that precedes it, and the theology is always centered on the kerygma. So the New Testament teaching is directly in line with the pattern of the Hebrew Scriptures and with other forms of Judaism. Thus we find statements such as these in Paul: "I appeal to you . . . brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God . . ." or "Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself," or "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Rom. 12:1; 15:2-3, 7). Paul's use of the hymn in his letter to the Philippians illustrates the pattern to which we have already referred. Anyone who reads the passage can see that Paul is making an ethical appeal. He is asking the Philippian Christians to do something. As grounds for this appeal he quotes a hymn that summarizes the entire kerygma. He does not quote just a part of it that might have reminded those he addressed of the qualities of Jesus' character as a pattern to be imitated. He quotes the entire story, although it is quite obvious that most of it does not directly relate to ethics at all, but to God's action through Jesus. The true basis for the ethical appeal is not the character or behavior of Jesus, or at least not these alone. The basis of Paul's appeal is the gospel event itself, the fact of the redeeming victory that God in Christ has won. This is what we find in 1 John: "We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Similarly, the writer to the Hebrews, having completed his theological discussion, challenges us with a ringing "therefore!" to the behavior that is appropriate for Christians (Heb. 12:1). It is the same appeal we find in the Gospels, founded on the gracious action of God, and especially on God's action in the present time, specifically in the life and ministry of Jesus himself:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news. (Mark 1:15)

Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.
(Mark 10:43b-45)

The most exhortatory passages of the Gospels, such as the Sermon on the Mount and the parables, exhibit the same principle. The sermon does not begin with exhortation at all, but with a statement. "The poor in spirit, the meek, the peacemakers, the merciful—these folk are 'blessed' [or, as we should perhaps more accurately translate the Greek, 'happy']," despite what the world or the press or common sense say and despite all evidence to the contrary. Clearly, these are statements with implications for behavior, but the statements themselves simply describe a state of affairs. They are kerygma, not didachē. The didachē they imply is a consequence of the kerygma.

We find the same again in Jesus' parables. Many of them imply certain kinds of behavior, but their basis is precisely that they are parables of the kingdom or reign of God. They reveal how God rules the world; and if this is how God rules the world, then certain behavior follows. Once again, didachē is the consequence of kerygma; teaching follows from the proclamation. Dodd thought that he had grounds for asserting two things about the New Testament as a whole. It witnesses to a single, central apostolic gospel or kerygma, which centers on the life, death, and exaltation of Jesus of Nazareth. Second, Christian ethical demand (or didachē) relates to this kerygma as response.

A Critique of Dodd's Views*

Dodd's hypothesis was not without its problems and limitations, and had its critics from the beginning. In

particular,

1) Dodd made much of a “crisis” in the church resulting from Jesus’ “failure” to return (a crisis that precipitated the creation of the written Gospels). This part of Dodd’s hypothesis comes from the summary because there is no evidence that such a crisis ever occurred.

2) Probably not as much weight can be attached to the speeches in Acts, supposedly by Peter, as Dodd attributes to them. Dodd did not consider that Luke (like other Hellenistic writers) was quite good at imitating the style he thought appropriate for a particular speaker (which would naturally mean a “Semitic” style for the early preachers of the gospel).

3) Dodd did not sufficiently acknowledge that there were others “preaching” Jesus in the first years of Christianity—in different ways and with different emphases, so as in some cases to produce what Paul, at least, was willing to call “another [and, by implication, false] gospel” (see Gal. 1:8!). Among such preachers of “another gospel” we may perhaps distinguish some who proclaimed a Jesus who was above all a bringer of Wisdom (possibly such a view of Jesus was represented by the “Q” document and by traditions behind the so-called Gospel of Thomas: cf. 1 Cor. 1:22b). Or we might see some who proclaimed “Jesus the mighty miracle worker” (cf. Mark 4:35-5:43; 1 Cor. 1:22a), and those who proclaimed a “Jesus the apocalyptic prophet” (cf. Mark 13; Revelation). Needless to say, none of these ways of proclaiming Jesus was necessarily false in itself, but any would, in the view of both Mark and Paul, become false if they were not set in the context of Jesus’ cross and resurrection (see Mark 8:27-32; 1 Cor. 1:21-25).

4) While there is force in the general observation that the Christian ethic follows from the Christian proclamation of what God has done for us, the linguistic distinction that Dodd tried to make between the words kerygma and didachē does not really work. It is not difficult to find examples in the New Testament where the word didachē is used in connection with “teaching” the gospel itself (e.g., Mark 1:17; Acts 17:19; Rom. 6:17; Heb. 6:2).

When the force of all these criticisms has been granted, we can still say that Dodd did perceive something significant about the shape and content of the New Testament literature in general. That shape and content match the pattern we have already observed for the Gospel According to Mark.

The first part was a prologue (1:1-8): it told of a messenger who announced the Coming One in accordance with prophecy. This corresponds to section (1) of Dodd’s outline of the apostolic preaching.

The second part (1:9-8:21) told of Jesus’ wonderful words and works in and around Galilee, and the third (8:22-10:52), of his journey to Jerusalem with his disciples, during which he repeatedly spoke to them of his coming death and resurrection and they repeatedly failed to understand. These two parts together correspond to section (2) of Dodd’s outline of the apostolic preaching.

The fourth part told of Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem (11:1-15:47), beginning with his messianic entry, his prophetic act in the Temple, and his teaching (12:1-44), continu- ing with his farewell discourse to his disciples on the Mount of Olives (13:1-37), and concluding with the story of his Passion—his last supper with his disciples, his arrest, his trial, his crucifixion, and his death (14:1-15:47). This corresponds to section (3) of Dodd’s outline of the apostolic preaching given above.

The fifth part was an epilogue (16:1-8): it told of a messenger who announced the Crucified and Risen One, whom his disciples were to see, just as he had promised, and a commission to witness. This corresponds to section (4) of Dodd’s outline. What we call the “Gospels” of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John would have been regarded by their authors’ contemporaries as “lives” (Greek: bioi; Latin: vitae). What suggested to the

evangelists that this kind of narrative was a suitable form in which to proclaim their Lord? Surely nothing less than the shape and content of the preaching itself! When we have made due allowance for Luke's compositional work in the early speeches in the Book of Acts, it remains true that their content must reflect something of the church's early proclamation in Israel, if only because that proclamation was in Israel, where Jesus lived and died. Rowan Williams has made the point well:

It is hard to deny that [Luke's] reconstruction must bear some relation to the realities of that first preaching, if only because the resurrection was indeed first proclaimed in Israel; that is, it was first proclaimed to a specific audience with a particular history and memory, both of remote and of recent events and transactions

For that preaching must have presupposed (as Luke insists) the memory of the crucified: "this Jesus," the identifiable figure whose death was a public event, and whose sentence, however odd or irregular, belonged to a particular and observable bit of the political process.

Essentially, then, the first Christian witness involved telling a story (a story that, in the view of its tellers, continued the Old Testament story, which was why they said it was "according to the Scriptures"), and a story that centered on a "life," the "life" of Jesus of Nazareth. That, surely, is what suggested to the evangelists that a written "life" would be a suitable form in which to present their own witness.

The Authority of the Proclamation

Discerning the content and shape of the Gospels offers us a basis on which to proceed to the interpretation of the texts that enshrine it, and for granting authority to them. Granted these texts involve a story, if we see ourselves as heirs to those whose story it was and to those who originally told it, then presumably we see ourselves as living out its latest stage. This stage will have its own characteristics. It certainly will not merely repeat what has gone before (what kind of a story would that be?), but it will presumably be consistent with the previous parts of the plot and with the already established nature of the characters. If we choose to align ourselves with certain characters in that story—say, its heroes and heroines—then we will need to know the earlier parts of the story and to understand those characters as well as we can, so as to act consciously in conformity with them and what they have achieved. We cannot expect simply to look up their part of the story and read from it answers to problems with which our part of the story confronts us. We cannot expect to do that, simply because we are in our part of the story, not theirs.