In literary terms what is a gospel? How are our Gospel books—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—related to the gospel or oral preaching of the early church? Though final answers are lacking,¹ this century has witnessed both the rise of a critical consensus about how such questions should be answered and a challenge to that consensus that offers an alternate set of answers. This article will attempt to describe both.

The critical consensus that emerged early in this century is closely connected with the name of Rudolf Bultmann.² This position can be clarified if we observe how Bultmann answers two questions. In the first place, how did the gospel or oral preaching contribute to the individuality of the canonical gospels? For Bultmann the gospel was set forth in 1 Cor 15:3–5, the kerygma of the cross and resurrection. Here the apostle Paul says he is giving the preaching of the apostles (vv. 1–2, 11): “...Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ... he was buried, ... he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ... he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.” From this text Bultmann draws the conclusion that the gospel is the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus as a fulfillment of Scripture.

The canonical gospels, according to Bultmann, are the result of a gradual expansion of this kerygma of Jesus’ death and resurrection. (a) The account of the Baptist and the proofs of fulfilled predictions were included to give fuller visualization of the kerygma and to assign it to a place in the divine plan of salvation. (b) Other material was included because the Christian sacraments had to be accounted for

in the life of Jesus, the cultically worshipped Lord. (c) Miracle stories were incorporated into the scheme since Jesus’ life, considered divine, served as proof of his authority. (d) Apophthegms came into the collection also as visualizations of Jesus’ authority. They in turn occasioned the inclusion of other sayings. (e) The sayings of Jesus were included because, for Christian congregations, Jesus in his role as teacher was important. (f) Current exhortations and congregational regulations in force were taken up because such regulations had to be accounted for in the life of Jesus. This means that, for Bultmann, the Gospel of Mark, the earliest gospel, was simply the end product of a tradition-historical development or evolution unrelated to the generic forms which existed independently of the milieu in which the Jesus tradition moved. In the critical consensus, a gospel is an expansion of the cross-resurrection kerygma. As such, it is as unique literally as the Christian kerygma is in terms of its content.

The apocryphal gospels, moreover, are regarded within the critical consensus as deviations from the pattern of the canonical gospels. After Mark had created the gospel genre by this process of assimilation, the other canonical gospels followed suit. The apocryphal gospels, however, deviated much further from the Marcan pattern than did Matthew, Luke, and John. With this view of the distinctive character of the apocryphal gospels, Bultmann had arrived at an explanation of the development of the gospel from its earliest oral form through the canonical gospel books into the period of corruption represented by the apocryphal gospels.

In the second place, we may observe how Bultmann answers a second question: What is the theological significance of the uniqueness of the canonical gospel form? The unique genre, he thinks, corresponds to and protects the unique content of the Christian gospel. John Drury writes:

A religion which likes to think of itself as uniquely true amongst religions, and deduces that conviction from the unique status of its founder amongst the world’s holy men, or projects such a status upon him, will

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