CHAPTER I

Introduction

The main lines of inquiry pursued in this book are nearly all foreshadowed in the lengthy, wide-ranging Chapter 2, 'Jesus and Gospel'. Here I explore the origin and the varied meanings of the 'gospel' word group all the way from its use by Jesus to refer to his own proclamation to its use as the title of a 'book' containing an account of the words and deeds of Jesus.

Although the term 'gospel' is as prominent in Christian vocabulary today as it ever has been, there have been very few detailed studies in English of the word group. It is difficult to account for the silence. Part of the answer may lie in the onslaught James Barr launched in 1961 against the then fashionable word studies.[1] Only a fool would try to turn the clock back and ignore Barr's strictures. But I am not alone in thinking that it is now time to reconsider some of the most important theological terms developed by the earliest followers of Jesus. Of course, full attention must be given both to the whole semantic field of which a given word group is part and to the varied social and religious contexts in which it is used. I shall argue that, when that is done, we find that, in the decade or so immediately after Easter, followers of Jesus developed language patterns which differed sharply from 'street' usage in both the Jewish and the Graeco-Roman worlds. Some of the terms which shaped early Christian theology were forged in 'rivalry' with contemporary language patterns. Scriptural themes and distinctive Christian convictions played their part, but so too did dialogue with current usage on the streets of east Mediterranean cities.

German scholars have been less coy about discussing the 'gospel' word group. No doubt their interest has been encouraged by the prominence of the terminology in the Lutheran tradition. Gerhard Friedrich's important article εὐαγγέλιον, first published in 1935 in the *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, drew on his teacher Julius Schniewind's influential

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[1] James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: SCM, 1961).

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study, *Euangelion*.[2] Friedrich's article is not immune from some of the criticisms raised by James Barr, but it includes mountains of invaluable background material. I shall also refer to the major studies by Peter Stuhlmacher (1968), Georg Strecker (1975), and Hubert Frankemölle (1994), sometimes in disagreement, and in the later sections of my chapter I shall follow paths none of these scholars has pursued.[3]

I shall suggest a quite specific setting in which Paul, his co-workers, and his predecessors first began to use 'gospel' in ways at odds with current usage. I shall insist that, although the imperial cult was not *the source* of early Christian use of the word group, it was *the background* against which distinctively Christian usage was forged and first heard. Christians claimed that God's once for all good news about Christ was to be differentiated from Providence's repeatable good news about the birth, accession, or return to health of Roman emperors.

In the opening section of Chapter 2 I draw attention to the gap which is opening up between the varied ways Christians use the 'gospel' word group today and current secular usage. Sociolinguists have observed at first hand the ways religious, political, ethnic, and other social groups develop their own 'insider' terminology, often by adapting the vocabulary of 'outsiders'. So too in the first century. The first followers of Jesus developed their own 'in-house' language patterns, partly on the basis of Scripture, partly in the light of their distinctive Christian convictions, but partly by way of modifying contemporary 'street' language. I hope that this study of one small part of the 'social dialect' of earliest Christianity will encourage similar studies, for this phenomenon seems to have escaped close attention until now.

There is a further reason for focussing on the gospel word group. The term 'gospel' is being used in some scholarly circles to provide legitimation for particular views about the importance and authority of Q, the collection of about 240 sayings of Jesus shared by Matthew and Luke. Q is now

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[2] G. Friedrich's article εὐαγγέλιον was translated in G. Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, E. tr. 1964), pp. 707–37. See also J. Schniewind, *Euangelion. Ursprung und erste Gestalt des Begriffs Evangelium*, Vols. I–II (Gütersloh, 1927/31).

[3] P. Stuhlmacher, *Das paulinische Evangelium* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968); G. Strecker, 'Das Evangelium Jesu Christi', in G. Strecker, ed., *Jesus Christus in Historie und Theologie, FS H. Conzelmann* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1975), pp. 503–48; H. Frankemölle, *Evangelium. Begriff und Gattung*, 2nd edn (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1994). Frankemölle's book includes a helpful and very full discussion of earlier literature.

referred to by some as a 'gospel',[4] or as the 'lost gospel',[5] in order to signal that this hypothetical source is as important both for the historian and for the theologian as the canonical gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

There is historical precedent for referring to Q as a 'gospel', for in the second century some sets of diverse traditions concerning the life and teaching of Jesus were referred to as 'gospels'. But that precedent is beside the point.[6] In most references today to Q as a 'gospel', a different agenda is at work. Modern portrayals of Jesus as a wisdom teacher on the basis of an alleged original and largely historically reliable layer of Q traditions are being offered as 'good news' to the post-modern world. What better way of legitimating such views than by dubbing Q traditions 'gospel'?[7]

So too with the exaggerated historical and theological claims made by some on behalf of the Gospel of Thomas. In its present form it is a fourth-century gnostic collection of sayings in Coptic attributed to Jesus. It is now being referred to by some as 'the fifth gospel' in order to shore up claims that its earlier layers provide access to a Jesus more congenial today than the Jesus portrayed by New Testament writers as God's good news for humankind.[8]

So in spite of the second-century precedent for referring to diverse collections of Jesus traditions as 'gospels', the assumption in some circles that Q and Thomas are 'gospel' for humankind today is to be repudiated. The primary reason for that is theological, not historical. Q and Thomas (and several other apocryphal gospels) do contain valuable historical traditions, but they do not proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ as witnessed to by Paul, by Mark, and by other early Christians later deemed to belong to the circle

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[4] For a history of the use of 'gospel' for Q since 1988, see J. S. Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel Q* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), p. 398 n. 63. See, for example, R. A. Piper, ed., *The Gospel Behind the Gospels: Current Studies on Q* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); J. M. Robinson, P. Hoffmann, and J. S. Kloppenborg, eds., *The Sayings Gospel Q in Greek and in English* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

[5] M. Borg et al., eds., *The Lost Gospel Q: The Original Sayings of Jesus* (Berkeley, Calif.: Ulysses, 1996).

[6] F. Neirynck, a doyen Q specialist, still refuses to refer to Q as a 'gospel' on the grounds that it is a hypothetical source; he prefers 'the Sayings Source Q'. See 'The Reconstruction of Q', in A. Lindemann, ed., *The Sayings Source Q and the Historical Jesus* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), p. 57.

[7] In effect this is conceded by Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q*, pp. 398–408. See also, for example, R. W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996); R. W. Funk, ed., *The Gospel of Jesus according to the Jesus Seminar* (Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge, 1999).

[8] S. J. Patterson and J. M. Robinson, *The Fifth Gospel Comes of Age* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1998); Cf. N.T. Wright, 'Five Gospels but No Gospel', in B. Chilton and C. A. Evans, eds., *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 83–120.

of apostles and their followers. When is a gospel not 'Gospel'? When it is a set of Jesus traditions out of kilter with the faith of the church. In essence, this was Irenaeus' answer at the end of the second century. I believe that it still has theological validity today.

By now it will be apparent that consideration of the gospel word group raises a whole set of historical and theological issues of perennial interest. Towards the end of Chapter 2 (in 2.9) a particularly fascinating question is discussed. When was 'gospel' first used to refer to a writing made up of narratives about Jesus rather than to oral proclamation or its content? My own answer is that the evangelist Matthew was the first to do so.

Once this new development in early Christian usage of the gospel word group had taken place, further questions crowded in. How many 'gospel books' did the church possess? Why did the second-century church eventually decide to fly in the teeth of critics who claimed that retention of four inconsistent accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus undermined the credibility of Christianity? What were the factors which led to Irenaeus' classic answer, 'one Gospel in fourfold form'? Chapter 3 discusses the emergence of the fourfold Gospel by drawing on many strands of evidence. The final section of this chapter changes gear from historical to theological issues, for acceptance of the fourfold Gospel carries with it several theological implications.

Chapter 4 explores in detail one of the topics touched on in the previous chapter. What status did Justin Martyr attach to the Jesus traditions and the gospels he referred to in the middle of the second century? To what extent does Irenaeus three decades or so later mark a break with Justin? I emphasize more strongly than most scholars the importance of *written* Jesus traditions for both Justin and Irenaeus.

In Chapter 5, the final chapter of Part I, I am still concerned with 'Jesus and Gospel', but from a very different angle. I take as my starting point Paul's enigmatic phrase 'the law of Christ' (Gal. 6.2). I insist that for Paul this 'law' is part of the Gospel he proclaimed, and not merely a slogan used to refer to ethical teaching linked only loosely, if at all, to his major theological concerns. I sketch the main ways this phrase and its cousins were understood in early Christianity and in some parts of the later tradition. Paul's phrase needs considerable unpacking if it is to be of service to the Christian Gospel today. When Paul's understanding of 'the law of Christ' is complemented by the varied themes associated with this phrase and its cousins up to the time of Justin Martyr, it can still enrich current theological reflection. I remain a great admirer of the apostle Paul, but in this particular case 'earliest' is not necessarily best. A canonical perspective helps, but some

of the most significant steps in interpretation of 'the law of Christ' were taken in the second century.

In Chapters 6 and 7, the two chapters in Part II, I consider the earliest sets of objections raised to the actions and teaching of Jesus, and to Christian claims concerning his resurrection. The approach will seem to some to be somewhat off-beat, and so it is. However, opponents of a political or religious leader often see more clearly than followers what is at stake. So it is entirely reasonable to search for polemical traditions. The quest is not easy, for most of the anti-Jesus traditions have been preserved 'against the grain' within early Christian writings.

Contemporary opponents of Jesus perceived him to be a disruptive threat to social and religious order. His proclamation of God's kingly rule and its implications was rightly seen to be radical. For some, his teaching and actions were so radical that they had to be undermined by an alternative explanation of their source. Jesus, it was claimed in his lifetime, was a demon-possessed magician, and probably also a demon-possessed false prophet. Readers who are *au fait* with the flood of recent literature on the so-called historical Jesus will recognize that this is a conclusion which runs against the tide. But I do not repent: I believe that it is well founded.

There is an intriguing parallel with one of the key points made in Chapter 2. From very early in the post-Easter period, proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ was heard against the backdrop of a rival set of 'gospels' concerning the Roman emperors. The key question was this: whose gospel? Providence's provision of the emperor as saviour and benefactor, or God's provision of Jesus Christ as redeemer and life-giver? Already in the lifetime of Jesus there were rival answers on offer to the question: who is this Jesus of Nazareth? For some he was in league with Beelzebul, for others he was proclaiming in word and action God's good news to the poor as a messianic prophet. Both before and after Easter, followers of Jesus rested their claims concerning him on their convictions concerning God, and the relationship of Jesus to God.

The two chapters in Part III are, both, concerned with the earliest surviving written traditions concerning Jesus Christ. Even though the earliest papyri of the gospels are all quite fragmentary, they are of special interest, for they are the earliest material evidence we have for Christianity.

In the past five years more very fragmentary papyri in the codex format have become available. They confront us with the pressing questions which are tackled in Chapters 8 and 9. Why are the earliest fragments of Christian writings all in the unfashionable codex format? And do those early papyri

tell us anything about the status and use of the writings in the Christian communities which preserved them?

Chapter 8 asks why early Christians were addicted to the codex. I tackle this question in some detail, and partly in the light of new evidence. I differentiate three stages in early Christian use of the codex. My stage 3 concerns c. AD 300, the point at which Christian scribes' addiction to the codex may have first influenced non-Christian scribes. My stage 2 discusses the variety of pragmatic factors which *sustained* early Christian addiction to the codex. I then turn to stage 1, the initial precocious use of the codex by scribes copying Christian writings.

My own insistence that in very earliest Christianity there was an almost seemless transition from 'notebook' to 'codex' will seem blindingly obvious to some, but in fact this explanation differs markedly from the 'big bang' theories on offer at present. If use of the codex was an extension of the use of notebooks, then there are important corollaries: notebooks were used by the very first followers of Jesus for excerpts from Scripture, for drafts and copies of letters, and perhaps even for the transmission of some Jesus traditions.

Chapter 9 claims that the recently published papyri of the gospels undermine the often-repeated view that, in contrast to Jewish copies of Scripture, early copies of the gospels were the 'workaday', 'utilitarian', 'downmarket' handbooks of an inward-looking sect. The earliest surviving papyri of the gospels confirm that, by the later decades of the second century, if not earlier, the latter's literary qualities and their authoritative status for the life and faith of the church were widely recognized.

In this book I frequently try to build up a cumulative case on the basis of as many strands of evidence as possible. Too much current New Testament research is confined within ever smaller circles. Whenever the pot of familiar questions is stirred repeatedly without the addition of new ingredients, the resulting fare is both bland and predictable.

In nearly every chapter I have worked backwards from later, clearer evidence and formulations to earlier, often partly hidden roots. Of course, anachronism lurks at every corner, but disciplined use of this approach can open up sorely needed fresh perspectives.

The origins of most books are complex. This one is no exception. Chapters 2, 8, and 9 make up over half the book; only a handful of paragraphs in these chapters have been published before. Chapters 3–7 are revised and in some cases extended versions of earlier publications. Details of the original publications are given at appropriate points in the notes.

PART I

Jesus and Gospel

chapter 2

Jesus and Gospel

The subject of this chapter is the origin and early Christian use of the noun 'gospel', the verb 'to proclaim good news' (or, 'to gospel'), and a set of near-synonyms.[1] Given its importance in earliest Christianity and for Christian theology more generally, discussion of this topic has not been as extensive as one might have expected.[2] On several key points opinion has been keenly divided and no consensus has emerged. I shall revisit some of the disputed issues and hope to advance discussion by offering several fresh considerations. In particular, I shall focus on the function of the word group in the religious and social setting of the earliest Christian communities.

2.1 'gospel' in current usage

In the sixteenth century the term 'gospel' featured frequently in the language repertoire of Erasmus and the Reformers. Erasmus often referred to 'the gospel philosophy'. In his 'Prologue to the New Testament' (1525) the translator William Tyndale included an astute summary of 'gospel':

Euagelio (that we cal gospel) is a greke worde,
and signyfyth good, mery, glad and joyfull tydings,
that maketh a mannes hert glad,
and maketh him synge, daunce and leepe for ioye.[3]

In that tumultuous century the term 'the gospel' often functioned as a shorthand way of referring to the Reformers and their distinctive views.

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[1] This chapter is a considerably extended version of my Inaugural Lecture as Lady Margaret's Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, given on 27 April 2000.

[2] There have been several major studies in German; details were given above, p. 2 nn 2–3. The word group has attracted curiously little attention from English-speaking scholars, though a notable exception is the Australian ancient historian G. H. R. Horsley's discussion, 'The "Good News" of a Wedding', in *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, Vol. iii (Macquarie University: The Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, 1983), pp. 10–15. See also A. J. Spallek, 'The Origin and Meaning of Εὐαγγέλιον in the Pauline Corpus', *CTQ* 57 (1993) 177–90.

[3] I owe this reference to R. I. Deibert, *Mark* (Louisville: Kentucky, 1999), p. 6.

For example, in 1547 John Hooper noted in a letter that, if the emperor (Charles V) should be defeated in war, King Henry VIII would adopt 'the gospel of Christ'. 'Should *the gospel* [i.e. the German Lutheran princes of the Schmalkdic League] sustain disaster, then he will preserve his ungodly masses.'[4] In section 2.8 of this chapter we shall see that in the first century the term 'Gospel' functioned similarly, as a shorthand term and as an identity marker.

In recent decades 'gospel' has been commandeered with increasing frequency by all colours and shades of Christians. Not long ago I discovered a church in Canada which calls itself not simply 'The Full Gospel Church', a tag I knew, but 'The Four Square Gospel Church'. I have noticed that Pope John Paul II likes the word 'gospel'.[5] In order to be ecumenically and theologically correct today, 'gospel' has to be sprinkled liberally in all manner of theological and ecclesiastical statements. Authors of popular Christian books also like to include the term in their book titles.[6]

In current Christian use 'gospel' is a shorthand term whose content is construed in different ways. Although the term sends out varying signals according to context, there are usually some lines of continuity with the early Christians' insistence that 'the Gospel' (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) is God's good news concerning the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In sharp contrast, however, the noun is used today in common parlance very differently. In 'street' language it has one primary sense: 'gospel truth' is a statement on which one can rely absolutely. A recent article in a UK national newspaper about new developments in lie detectors carried this caption: 'Do you tell porkies or gospel truth?' Not long ago our builder gave me a timetable for planned alterations to our home and said, 'Graham, don't take this as gospel truth!'

There is a curious irony about current use of 'gospel' or 'gospel truth' to refer to a statement on which one can rely completely. In 'street' language today the phrase is a secularized version of Paul's use of the phrase 'the truth of the gospel' in Gal. 2.5 and 14. Current usage is miles away from

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[4] See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant: Edward VI and the Protestant Reformation* (London: Allen Lane, the Penguin Press, 1999), p. 58.

[5] For example: Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (1998). 'The Gospel is not opposed to any culture . . . Cultures are not only not diminished by this encounter; rather, they are prompted to open themselves to the newness of the Gospel's truth and to be stirred by this truth to develop in new ways.'

[6] My colleague Dr Julius Lipner has drawn my attention to a fascinating and very different use of 'gospel' in a book title: *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, translated and edited by Swami Nikhilandanda (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekanda Center, 1942). Sri Ramakrishna is one of the best-known modern Hindu holy men. Dr Lipner notes that here 'gospel' is clearly a loan-word from Christianity as it impinged on Indian culture in nineteenth-century Bengal.

Paul's rich and profoundly theological understanding of the phrase.[7] There is now a considerable gap between Christian and secular use of 'gospel'.

Secular use of 'gospel' is gradually becoming more common. If that were to continue, in some countries the distinctive Christian use of the word group would be overshadowed by secular use and thus become part of the 'in-house' language of somewhat marginalized minority groups of Christians. 'Gospel' would then be a 'sociolect', to use the term now favoured by sociolinguists.[8] I shall suggest in section 2.8 that the word group functioned in precisely this way in the first century.

2.2 PLOTTING THE PATH

In this lengthy chapter my main points will be developed along the following lines. In the next section I shall claim that, although Jesus used the verb 'to proclaim God's good news' and was strongly influenced in his own messianic self-understanding by Isa. 61.1-2, he did not use the noun 'gospel'.

I shall then consider several possible explanations for the origin of the word group in the early post-Easter period. The most striking feature of earliest Christian usage is the way 'the Gospel' rapidly became a set phrase whose content could simply be assumed by Paul and his co-workers without the need for further explanation. I shall suggest that use of the noun probably first emerged in Greek-speaking Christian circles as a radical 'Christianizing' of both the limited Biblical and the more extensive contemporary usage. Although we cannot be certain about the precise *origin* of the distinctive ways Christians used the word group, it is clear that they developed in rivalry with the prominent use in the propaganda and ideology of the imperial cult of this word group and *a clutch of associated themes*. The latter point is most important. The rivalry between 'the one Gospel of Jesus Christ' and 'the gospels' of the Caesars encompasses far more than the use of the 'gospel' word group.

In section 2.5 I shall refer to the ways in which ancient historians have made considerable strides in the last two decades or so in advancing our knowledge of the imperial cult in the first century. I shall then discuss some of the more important literary and epigraphical evidence.

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[7] The Revd Barbara Moss has suggested to me that current secular use of 'gospel truth' may derive from the custom of swearing on the Bible in a law court to tell 'the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth'.

[8] Sociolinguists now differentiate between an 'idiolect' and a 'sociolect'. The former is an individual's idiosyncratic pattern of language, while the latter is pattern of language specific to a group – it may include new coinage of vocabulary or specialized use of 'normal' terms. See section 2.8 below.