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0521609380 - Kerygma and Didache: The Articulation and Structure of the Earliest Christian Message

James I. H. McDonald

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of *kerygma* and *didache*

The dawn of modern, kerygmatic theology broke upon the slumbering world in 1892 with the publication of a work by Martin Kähler¹ which decisively challenged the historical relativism of the nineteenth-century ‘lives of Jesus’² and redirected attention to the Christ of the apostolic preaching. ‘The real Christ is the preached Christ, and the preached Christ is the Christ of faith.’³ The high noon of the movement was marked by the ascendancy of Barth and Bultmann, blood brothers of the *form-geschichtliche Schule* but diverging sharply, as brothers sometimes do, in the very manner in which they developed their inheritance. The post-Bultmannians still walk in the afternoon sunlight of kerygmatic theology, even if the lengthening shadows suggest that the darkness of the night will not be postponed indefinitely. The twentieth-century day, thus illumined by the sunlight of the *kerygma*, has had its own share of diurnal difficulties, many of them still unresolved as the working day draws towards its close, but it has always claimed the advantage of locating clearly the genuine source of light and power: the *kerygma*, the preaching which has characterised and enshrined the Christian faith from the beginning. Yet this basic nuclear concept presents a concatenation of problems, a further examination of which is essential to any appreciation in depth of the nature of Christian utterance.

The meaning of kerygma in the New Testament

The term *kerygma*, like the English word ‘preaching’, possesses inherent ambivalence. It may refer to preaching as an activity or as the content of proclamation, and sometimes it is not easy to decide which meaning predominates. When Paul comments that ‘it pleased God through the foolishness of the *kerygma* to save those who believe’ (1 Cor. 1: 21), is he referring to the folly of the activity of preaching or the folly of the message itself? With G. Friedrich,⁴ one may note Paul’s desire to underline the content of preaching (1: 23, ‘we preach Christ crucified’, and perhaps also

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1: 18, 'the word of the cross'): the *kerygma* in 1: 21 is then the content of the message, which is mere foolishness to the sophisticated Greek.⁵ But in 1 Cor. 2: 4, where Paul again dissociates his *logos* (speech) and *kerygma* (preaching) from the plausibility of worldly wisdom, he is clearly referring to the act of preaching which has an eschatological dynamic,⁶ so that the faith of those who responded to his preaching was born not of human wisdom but of the power of God. This nuance can hardly be absent in 1: 21. C. F. Evans strikes a delicate balance in his interpretation: 'The content of the activity corresponds with the activity itself, "Christ crucified" being the apparently foolish content of the foolish activity of preaching.'⁷ If one were to assess where the weight of meaning falls generally, one would conclude that *kerygma* almost invariably contains the primary notion of the dynamic activity of preaching, but no context excludes the idea of content,⁸ which must therefore be included within the general connotation of the term.

A further ambivalence is illustrated by the difficulty of interpreting a phrase such as 'the *kerygma* of Jesus Christ' (Rom. 16: 25). If the construction is taken to be an objective genitive, the meaning is 'the preaching about Jesus Christ', the whole phrase being a summary, perhaps, of Rom. 10: 8-12.⁹ If the phrase is modelled on the corresponding expression 'according to my gospel', the meaning is 'the message which Jesus Christ proclaimed'.¹⁰ This allows a direct parallelism between the *kerygma* of Jesus and the *kerygma* of the early church, but New Testament usage is frequently more sophisticated and ambivalent. Thus 'Christ' is often the content of the *kerygma*: 'we preach Christ crucified' (1 Cor. 1: 23); but additionally and at the same time Christ is the agent in and behind the activity of preaching, as is clearly shown in Paul's understanding of his commission (Gal. 1: 16). This eschatological dimension has been rightly stressed by R. Bultmann.¹¹ In the Pastorals, *kerygma* can also denote the office of preaching with which the apostle is entrusted and which is the means of manifesting eschatological truth (Titus 1: 2f.; cf. 2 Tim. 4: 17). But, as will be subsequently illustrated, when the content of *kerygma* is examined in a more detailed way, no agreement exists as to its precise constituents.

Some modern uses of kerygma

That kerygmatic theology in general has attempted to remain faithful to this complexity of central concern may readily be admitted. Bultmann treats the *kerygma* as 'eschatological event'; his hermeneutic is directed to the problem of the meaningfulness of the *kerygma* to 'modern man'; and if he plays down the delineation of its content in terms of explicit formulae,

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he emphasises that it always has to do with God's action in Christ.¹² But the brand of kerygmatic theology which exercised considerable influence in Britain and beyond in the mid-twentieth century can hardly be credited with maintaining a similar equilibrium. The publication of C. H. Dodd's attractive and influential book, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, had the unfortunate effect of encouraging an inflexible understanding of the *kerygma* in terms of supposedly primitive and relatively stereotyped confessional formulae. It became a commonplace in English theological circles to assume the existence of 'a common pattern of *kerygma* in early speeches in Acts, in several passages of St. Paul, and in Mark's summary of Jesus' preaching in Galilee'.¹³ Such widespread acceptance of a hypothesis that was by no means exhaustively argued suggests that it spoke to some psychological need on the part of the English-speaking theological public. A century or so of critical scholarship that had left the old dogmatic orthodoxy threadbare and discredited had also presented the New Testament as a conglomerate of oddments dazzling in their variety and fascinating in their peculiarity but reflecting many different historical and doctrinal milieux. The rediscovery of the primitive, kerygmatic pattern suggested that the vital clue to the unity of the New Testament and the location of its true focus had been uncovered.¹⁴ The consequence of the inherent rigidity of this position was that the dynamic and fluid activity of preaching was caught and stopped as by a still camera. The electric shock of the eschatological 'now', the moment in a man's experience in which the living word of preaching strikes home more sharply than a two-edged sword, was neutralised by the intrusion of the concept of a timeless and eternal kingdom, a Platonic form¹⁵ to be detected in the process of realisation, if not wholly realised, amid the temporal and ephemeral.

Fortunately, the element of aberration in this understanding of the *kerygma* has become much clearer in more recent discussion. If the film is temporarily stopped to allow analysis of the sermons of Peter and Paul in Acts, it must be recognised that such sermons, even if they do represent an authentic summary of what Peter and Paul actually said on the occasions in question, are the products of a fluid process of development in thinking and interpretation within the Christian community from its earliest stages onwards. Besides, the credal formulae abstracted from the film clip are themselves wholly time-conditioned, and in consequence have their limitations as vehicles for the wealth of insight, experience and faith which they strive to bear. Such desiccated formulae have little point of contact with Paul's preaching 'in demonstration of the Spirit and of power'. In more flamboyant vein, T. G. A. Baker invites the modern reader to study again the kerygmatic formulae abstracted as described and to ask whether, on

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their own, they 'would ever convert a fly - even a first-century Palestinian fly - let alone one of the twentieth-century European variety'.¹⁶ In other words, such formulae are no longer kerygmatic in operation.

How biblical is modern usage?

The use of the Greek word *kerygma* as a technical term in modern theology carries an implicit claim that biblical usage is thus perpetuated. Yet the word *kerygma* is not particularly prominent in the New Testament, and the term *euangelion*, occurring nearly ten times as often, would appear to be more representative of biblical practice.¹⁷ Not only does *euangelion* express the note of joyfulness, but it is also more satisfactory as a holistic term for the Christian message.¹⁸ The limitations of the term *kerygma* have led to several disquieting terminological developments in modern biblical theology. Even in the heyday of the 'objectifying' view of the *kerygma* so strongly advocated by C. H. Dodd, its monolithic structure was rendered questionable by the failure of its advocates to agree upon the precise composition of the ancient message.¹⁹ Its holistic inadequacy has led to the use of *didache* as a supplement to *kerygma*; and while this may appear to echo biblical usage - 'preaching and teaching' is a recognised biblical formula - it is not clear in practice that modern usage follows or preserves the biblical meaning.²⁰ A more recent development has been to use the plural term *kerygmata* to express the variety of ways in which the central message is communicated: 'it would be better to speak of "*kerygmata*" than, too confidently, of "*the kerygma*"'.²¹ However valid this insight may be and however preferable to the uniform, monolithic structure indicated above, misgivings abound in relation to terminological concerns. To use the plural form is to depart even further from New Testament usage.²² And the original object of *kerygma* terminology was to express the unity of the Christian proclamation, which is now apparently dissipated in a plurality of forms. Two conclusions are indicated: first, 'the term *kerygma* is more a technical term of modern biblical theology than of the Bible itself';²³ and, in the second place, in studies of Christian origins relating to the emergence and early articulation of the Christian message, the term *kerygma* can be used only with the greatest caution, and if it can be replaced by a terminology more representative of New Testament usage and practice, this alternative terminology should be adopted.

The relationship between kerygma and didache

If *kerygma* was the solar centre in the universe of kerygmatic theology, *didache* was sometimes represented as a lesser satellite whose function was entirely governed by the greater sun and whose light was no more than

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a lunar reflection. C. H. Dodd writes: 'It was by *kerygma*, says Paul, not by *didache*, that it pleased God to save men',²⁴ although a glance at 1 Cor. 1: 21 indicates that Paul said nothing of the kind. Elsewhere, Dodd writes:

It is evident from the whole New Testament that the message of the church was conceived as having two main aspects: the Gospel of Christ, the theme of preaching (*kerygma*), and the Law or Commandment of Christ, the theme of teaching (*didache*)... The two are intimately united, though distinguishable.²⁵

This inner dualism is worked out at several levels: for example, between the proclamation of salvation in Christ and the teaching of Christian moral practice; and between the proclamation to the non-Christian world and the instruction of those within the community. G. Wingren commented:

It is surprising that Dodd, who in the whole New Testament sees the manifestation of one and the same oft-repeated *kerygma*, can be tempted by such a distinction. The Epistles that preach the *kerygma* most clearly, for example, 1 Peter and others like it, were sent to Christian congregations in trouble... It is false intellectualism to separate those who belong to the church from the missionary *kerygma*.²⁶

In somewhat similar terms, C. F. D. Moule writes:

if we maintain the familiar distinction between *kerygma* and *didache* too rigidly, we shall not do justice to the real nature of all Christian edification, which builds, sometimes more, sometimes less, but always at least some of the foundation material into the walls and floors.²⁷

That there is a broad distinction between preaching and teaching,²⁸ in the ancient and the modern world, must be allowed. W. D. Davies is justified in underlining Matthew's didactic vocabulary in his introduction to the Sermon (Matt. 5: 1), but one notes that the distinction lies in the informality of the situation and the posture of the teacher rather than the substance of the message: indeed, Luke and presumably Q tend towards a sermonic rather than a didactic presentation of essentially the same material (cf. Luke 6: 17–20).²⁹ Further, preaching and teaching are properly regarded as being broadly complementary and as denoting the whole process of communicating the appropriate message. This operates equally for the ministry of Jesus (cf. Matt. 4: 23; 9: 35; 11: 1) and the apostolic mission (Acts 28: 31). The extent to which the terms overlap and integrate makes it difficult to separate them except in general terms.

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Thus, Friedrich's contention that those who heard Jesus' preaching are different from those who heard his teaching³⁰ would be difficult to maintain in any rigid sense; and he goes on to show that Jesus, exercising his distinctive *exousia* (Matt. 7: 29), preached in the synagogue (the normal place for 'teaching') as he proclaimed the advent of the kingdom (cf. Luke 4: 21). In fact, the terms are so interrelated that they can be used virtually as synonyms: the disciples, sent out in Mark 3: 14f. to 'preach and... cast out devils', return in Mark 6: 30 to 'report to him all that they had done and all that they had taught'. Equally, the attempt to distinguish between them in terms of content – the usual assumption being that *didache* represents ethical teaching – is shattered by Rom. 2: 21, where, as J. J. Vincent has put it, 'the "content" of the preacher's preaching (*κήρυγμα*) is good, solid ethical *διδασχῆ*!' ³¹ 'While you preach against stealing, do you steal?' Such distinction as exists between them must be sought in less tangible features.

An important contribution to this debate was made by K. Stendahl.³² He distinguished between *kerygma* as a formal, functional activity (*Formal-begriff*) – roughly what Bultmann means by 'address' – and *kerygma* as content (*Inhaltsbegriff*), usually related to 'the things concerning Jesus' and taken by Dodd as *Heilsgeschichte*. He argued that preaching in the first sense may be 'kerygmatic' without however presenting *kerygma* in the second sense. Conversely, if *kerygma* in the latter sense is presented as no more than a recital of events or a string of propositions, it is not in fact kerygmatic: it is *unkerygmatisches Kerygma*. And what is in effect *didache* operating in a particular situation may be profoundly kerygmatic: this is, in Stendahl's terminology, *kerygmatisches Nicht-Kerygma*. Bearing this insight in mind, J. J. Vincent examined the synoptic gospels³³ in order to identify their kerygmatic elements and emerged with the conclusion that the key to the intrinsic synoptic *kerygma* lay precisely in its *didache*, which related to the whole story of Jesus: 'the only *κήρυγμα* of which we are entitled to speak on the basis of the Synoptics is "a didactic kerygma"'.³⁴ In relation to Jesus' teaching on the way of the cross, for example, 'the radical *διδασχῆ* is the *κήρυγμα* of God'.³⁵

What are we to conclude from such evidence? *Kerygma* and *didache* can still be used as complementary terms to denote the central complex of Christian utterance but because of their peculiar interrelatedness they cannot provide a basis for a proper operational analysis of Christian communication. It is not enough to attempt to identify given material formally as *kerygma* or *didache*, for it might have both kerygmatic or didactic characteristics to a greater or lesser degree and at the same time possess other features which signify its nature and intention in a more useful way. Our

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aim in this work, therefore, is to identify and classify forms of Christian communication according to their nature, intention and operation. Such a task involves the elucidation of the broad hinterland of Christian communication of which the form critics were well aware but which in practice was subordinated in their work to the analysis of particular forms of the gospel tradition. Hence we propose to lay more, not less, stress upon the *Sitz im Leben* of early Christian utterance, for it was within the *koinonia* of the early communities that Christian meaning and insight found articulation and took on appropriate formal structures (cf. Acts 2: 42).

Towards a structural analysis of *kerygma* and *didache*

Before attempting to formulate our own hypothesis, we must take note of relevant research already carried out by Roman Catholic and by Scandinavian scholars in particular.

Formal analysis in Roman Catholic debate

Roman Catholic discussion, recognising a 'crisis of preaching' in the modern situation, has moved the subject into a position of central concern.³⁶ J. A. Jungmann has pointed to the biblical model of the proclamation of the gospel as the key to dynamic preaching with strong pastoral and kerygmatic concern. For him, *kerygma* is the christocentric message that comprises the essential content of Christian teaching and is designed for proclamation. It is to be distinguished from *catechesis*, which consists of practical religious training, teaching the history of redemption as in the scriptures, and systematic instruction in doctrine.³⁷ A. Rétif, in his more detailed historical research on the subject, emerged with a three-fold distinction: *kerygma*, the proclamation of the kingdom of God in Christ for evangelistic purposes; *catechesis* (or *didache*), the teaching that introduced converts to Christian doctrine and moral practice; and *didaskalia*, the more advanced instruction in the faith.³⁸ D. Grasso discerned yet another triple structure: evangelisation, *catechesis*, and homily, all of which have their focus in the person of Christ the Saviour.³⁹ Evangelisation, which is supremely kerygmatic, includes the proclamation of salvation history, centred on the cross and resurrection, and calls for decision. *Catechesis* follows evangelisation and is instructional, presenting the message of salvation with a view to initiating the convert into the Christian life and the mystery of Christ, either before or after baptism. Homily takes place in a liturgical context, within the family of the faithful, as 'a means whereby the liturgy realizes its proper goal, the union of the faithful with Christ', and is aimed at the will.⁴⁰ There is, however, an overriding unity in preaching, no one form being totally independent of the others.

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These triple structures in particular represent a clear advance beyond the formal two-fold distinction between *kerygma* and *didache*. One difficulty in the Roman Catholic debate, however, is that frequently formal analysis is insufficiently related to the study of New Testament forms and is much influenced by the 'reading back' of church practice into the apostolic period.⁴¹ The interdependence of the different forms, though recognised,⁴² is not fully developed, and the more instructional forms lack the dynamic they appear to possess in the New Testament.

Scandinavian approaches to formal analysis

Bo Reicke⁴³ found his starting point in form criticism and comparative folklore – disciplines which indicate that early Christian preaching, like other types of cultural development, cannot have been without set forms at any stage. While the apostolic message was admittedly new and *sui generis*, historical research yields no support for the hypothesis of *creatio ex nihilo* as far as external forms are concerned. Since the apostles were the representatives of the Lord, 'an extension and multiplication of His person',⁴⁴ the comparison of their preaching with the models offered by the teaching of Jesus is particularly illuminating, but further prototypes may be sought in Old Testament prophecy and the messianic proclamations of the inter-testamental period.⁴⁵ It will be part of our strategy to explore, however briefly, this hinterland of Christian communication.

Reicke is less successful when he turns to a consideration of the main aspects of the divine messenger's activity, which he identifies as (i) conversion, including admonition and invitation, (ii) instruction and edification, (iii) testament, and (iv) revelation. Each of these categories is open to objection. 'Conversion' cannot properly describe a category of preaching. In any case, conversion is not in itself a function of the divine messenger: to claim that it is so would be theologically unsound and linguistically inaccurate.⁴⁶ A better description of what Reicke intends might be derived from the functions and activities of prophets, evangelists or missionaries. His term 'instruction and edification' is much too wide and requires to be broken down into its constituent elements, i.e., into the identifiable forms of communication which it embraces. *Catechesis* and homily have already emerged as possibilities. By contrast, Reicke's third category, 'testament', is much too specific. It refers to a particular type of rhetorical discourse, the 'farewell speech', which is perhaps better classified as a distinctive expression – often literary – of a broader paraenetic or homiletic form.⁴⁷ Finally, his use of the term 'revelation' to denote a form of preaching requires to be challenged. On the one hand, it is essentially a theological term, denoting the unveiling of the mystery of God in human history and

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therefore the concern, to a greater or lesser extent, of all Christian communication. On the other hand, 'revelational' utterances in the New Testament are regularly attributed to 'prophets',⁴⁸ and the question must be raised whether this kind of communication should not be classified with the prophetic preaching as a whole.⁴⁹ Certain forms of apocalyptic, however, seem to belong to some kind of teaching category, even if they form a singular strand of it.

Among other valuable Scandinavian contributions, a special place must be given to the work of H. Riesenfeld.⁵⁰ Concerned with the pre-history and origins of the gospel traditions, with the *Sitz im Leben* of the tradition of the words and deeds of Jesus, Riesenfeld is critical of the one-sidedness and dogmatism of at least latter-day form criticism.⁵¹ A comparison of various examples of preaching in Acts with the gospel material indicates that 'mission preaching was not the *Sitz im Leben* of the Gospel tradition'.⁵² The proclamation of the gospel within the Christian communities possessed a strong instructional and moral emphasis – the latter in the form of *paraenesis*. In this community preaching reference was undoubtedly made to the gospel tradition (e.g., 1 Cor. 7: 10f.; James *passim*). Yet, since such preaching did not so much transmit the gospel tradition as assume a knowledge of it on the part of the hearers, the *Sitz im Leben* of this tradition is not to be found in this communal instruction either. Such negative findings clear the way for Riesenfeld's main thesis, subsequently corroborated in large measure by B. Gerhardsson's study in depth of the transmission of tradition in the Jewish world in particular,⁵³ that the gospel tradition belongs to a category that is *sui generis* and is to be designated as *paradosis*. In the transmission of this material, the apostles had a particularly important role: they were the witnesses to and guardians of the holy tradition of the words and deeds, the life and work, of Jesus, which form 'a holy Word, comparable with that of the Old Testament':⁵⁴ 'the New Torah', 'the Word of God of the new, eschatological covenant',⁵⁵ recited in Christian public worship and communicated to a wider circle by a growing Christian ministry. Its special character is explained by the fact that 'this tradition, *qua* tradition, was derived from none other than Jesus. Hence our thesis is that the beginning of the Gospel tradition lies with Jesus himself.'⁵⁶ This thesis is supported by a consideration of the rabbinic methods of instruction which Jesus, as a teacher, used within the circle of his disciples and which can still be traced in such stylistic features as poetic constructions, in Aramaic echoes and in parabolic forms. Even parts of the passion narrative are referred back to Jesus' own interpretation of the events that were about to happen, as are the essential constituents of christology and ethics. Equally, the Johannine tradition is referred independently to the discourses

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and meditations of Jesus in the circle of his disciples.⁵⁷ The picture is completed by the assumption of messianic consciousness on the part of Jesus:

Jesus is not only the object of a later faith, which on its side gave rise to the growth of oral and also written tradition, but, as Messiah and teacher, Jesus is the object and subject of a tradition of authoritative and holy words which he himself created and entrusted to his disciples for its later transmission in the epoch between his death and the *parousia*.⁵⁸

Riesenfeld's preoccupation with the gospel tradition distinguishes his approach from that of our thesis, which is concerned with the structure of early Christian communication as a whole, but in the background a structural analysis is discernible in his work in terms of mission preaching, community preaching (with strong instructional and paraenetic overtones), and the transmission of tradition or *paradosis*. His great achievement was to secure the place of the last mentioned in its own right within the complex of early Christian communication. His other categories are less satisfactory. Community preaching appears an amalgam of several elements: preaching in the homiletic sense, *catechesis*, more advanced doctrinal and theological instruction, and ethical *paraenesis*. His understanding of mission preaching utilises the notion of a 'compressed summary of the saving work of Christ' and he sharply distinguishes such kerygmatic preaching to an outside audience from proclamation within the community. Both of these points we have already found less than satisfactory. Even more serious is his flight from genuinely creative elements in the early church, such as *propheteia* inspired by the Spirit. Even if he is justified in pillorying the excesses of the form critics in this respect, he is in imminent danger of ending up with as one-sided a view as that of his opponents.⁵⁹

An operational model for early Christian preaching and teaching

The above brief survey of selected contributions to the debate has prepared the way for the articulation of our own thesis. To begin with Riesenfeld's startling omission: prophets and *propheteia* occupy a position of considerable prominence in the New Testament.⁶⁰ Prophets appear closely associated with apostles in the foundation of the church, and with teachers and evangelists in the work of its ministry.⁶¹ *Propheteia* has to do with the reception and articulation of revelation, with the proclamation of the divine message as in the Old Testament tradition (cf. Rom. 10: 13ff.), and with pneumatic and other elevated experiences in worship and devotion.⁶² What distinctive prophetic forms, structures or *Gattungen* can be discerned in the New Testament?