

First Three Gospels, II

Today we will be dealing with Jesus' ministry. As I said before, there have been over 500 pages of theological material written on the synoptic Gospels, and we are going to try to cover it in one day. So it will be a survey trying to highlight a few of the major factors for us in New Testament theology.

I want to begin by reminding you that Isaiah spoke of the ministry of Christ. Isaiah 61 says:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,  
because the LORD has anointed me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,  
the day of vengeance of our God,  
to comfort all who mourn.

There is more there, but Jesus does not quote all of that when He begins His public ministry in Nazareth and experiences His first real public rejection. Remember, He went to Nazareth according to Luke 4:16. He took the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor," and that is where He stops. He does not go on to say, "The day of the vengeance, to provide for those who grieve in Zion, to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes." You may wonder why Jesus did not read the whole quote. He quoted enough to get these peoples' minds centered on the prophecy of Isaiah so that He could say, "Today this is fulfilled in your ears, and before you stands the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy." That is what we have to consider, this ministry of Jesus and the fulfillment of the prophetic ministry of Moses and the prophets. He Himself prophesied concerning aspects of His own ministry. Let us pray.

*Lord, our God, we thank you that we have this opportunity again to be here together to study Your Word and to seek to understand together what it is that You did, ministering when You were on earth, Lord Jesus, and what You have done for us even today. Bless us together, keep sin from us, give us joy in our work for Jesus' sake, Amen.*

We will begin with the nativity of Jesus. Vos speaks of revelation connected with the nativity. He points out, first of all, the difference between referring to this as the nativity rather than the incarnation. What is the difference? What do people think when you speak of the nativity of Jesus? Is there anything miraculous in the idea of nativity? No. It simply speaks of His human birth and the circumstances surrounding it, the "where" and "when." But the term "nativity" is not used in the biblical account, nor is the theological term "incarnation." John stresses the incarnation, "And the Word became flesh," but the three synoptic Gospels do not do that.

The synoptic Gospels tell about how Jesus was born. Vos gives us eight characteristic features of these accounts of Jesus' birth. First, the nativity ties in closely with the Old Testament. There is a continuity of mode of expression. The nativity accounts, all these things that are recorded concerning Jesus' birth, point back into the Old Testament. They also show how the prophecies included detailed prophecies about the birth of the Messiah, such as, "Born of a virgin," and so many others. And this is now fulfilled.

The specifics are there in Old Testament prophecy. There are also many new revelations that had not yet transpired in the Old Testament. There is a lot of new revelation here. The third feature Vos discusses is that this new revelation carries a uniquely and specifically redemptive character. This is evidenced by it being given in both the objective announcement by God and in the subjective understanding of the people involved. This shows the background of a state of sin and unworthiness and the corresponding signature of grace and salvation. Sin and unworthiness, grace and salvation are brought together in beautiful tandem in the scene of the nativity.

The fourth feature is that there is an absence of political references to the people for whom He comes. There is political reference, such as to the setting of the Roman Empire, but nothing about political fulfillment. Thus the emphasis is on this redemptive, spiritual character, and as Jesus works it out later on, how He comes to save His people from their enemies, from their sin. That is where the emphasis is, not on the political institution.

The fifth feature is that there is no legalism evident in this. What we want to stress is that Israel was first of all to fulfill the law, and then by manner of recompense the Messiah and all that pertains to Him would appear. One might say that this was the emphasis of the Old Testament; Israel had to live up to the covenant demands and the Messiah would come. Israel did not live up to the covenant demands. The Messiah came anyway and enables people to live up to the covenant demands. So the Messiah comes in spite of failure and He comes to enable us to not fail. The nativity brings that out.

The closeness of the bond between the Old Testament is shown through the prolongation into these early revelations of two lines of ancient eschatological prophecy: "The day of the Lord," and "The coming of the Messiah." These were two great lines in the Old Testament: "The Messiah will come" and "The day of the Lord will come." Now, with the coming of Christ, with the Messiah, has the day of the Lord come? The two lines that you might see as distinctly separate, really seem to converge here. When Christ comes, that is the day of the Lord. That initiates the day of the Lord, if you want to think of it in the great eschatological fulfillment. That is the beginning of that last period of the age to come. There is one more characteristic feature that comes through in the nativity, tying it into the Old Testament. There are certain intimations of the universalism of the Gospel, the destiny to include other nations that the Gospel now includes. Simeon speaks of the salvation prepared by God as a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the announcement to Mary is that the child is set for the fall and rise of many in Israel and is for a sign that shall be spoken against. It even intimates that a painful experience described as a sword piercing Mary's heart will contribute somehow to all these effects. The coming of the Messiah will include the illumination for the Gentiles.

Looking at these different features we notice that the political institution is not even mentioned. Keeping the law is not mentioned, but there is a strong redemptive significance here. He comes to fulfill so many of the other covenant promises. He comes indeed as the royal one to establish or to bring into fuller reality the reign of God and He does that coming as a babe, as the incarnate one.

There are three other features that Vos speaks of, and I think that these features are so important for understanding the setting of the New Testament revelation. He deals with these on pages 303, 309, and 310. How did God shape the occurrence of this event, Jesus' birth? There are three ways you can look at it and all three from my perspective are correct. God stopped the flow of sin from mother to child, thus the Lord Jesus is sinless. That is stressed throughout the Gospels. No one could rightfully call Him a sinner. Of course, the Jews did say, "He is a sinner because He eats with sinners." But the truth is, He who was without sin became sin for us. How was this flow of sin stopped? Through the miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit. Our mediator is indeed the sinless one.

Secondly, there is no human paternity. How do you account for that? By that same unique conception by the Holy Spirit. We have a divine Christ. He is God. God is His Father. Do not doubt it. It is clearly stated. It would take very poor exegesis and hermeneutics to deny this, as many liberals do. We have a divine mediator. He is God. The Jews finally said, "He makes Himself equal to God." To make yourself equal to God is to make yourself God. "He must die. He blasphemes." The Jews understood that Jesus was claiming to be God, though they did not believe His claims. Read the nativity accounts. He is God. But at the same time, He is human. He was conceived by a woman. He was carried through the period of gestation for nine months. He was born like every one of us. He is human. This is completely supernatural. If you emphasize either Christ's divinity or His humanity you miss a tremendous amount of what is so important about our Messiah. For example, some in the Southern Egyptian Arabic areas emphasized Christ's divinity. They emphasized that He was divine and that at best, His human nature was like a cloak that He could take off.

I did my doctoral work translating sermons preached and written by Jacob of Serug. It was interesting how in his sermons he was uncomfortable with the Old Testament prophecies and with the nativity scenes. He was trying to prove that Christ's humanity was not a real humanity. He claimed that when Jesus died, He did not really die because He was God and God could not die. On the cross, He covered himself with his human cloak but He was not really human. Study these three passages of the nativity accounts of the first three Gospels. He is sinless. He is God. He is man. You have to combine these three important factors as you approach this. Do not ask any questions about this. Do not start saying, "I will doubt it until it is proven to me." The passages are so clear on this. His nativity is indeed a supernatural event. He, the Son of God, becomes flesh. He is a sinless man, but still knows all the weaknesses and failings of human nature and the results of sin.

Now we will discuss His baptism, which is important. Why was Jesus baptized? That continues to be the big question. If He was God and He was one with the Spirit, why was He baptized? No New Testament theologian is going to fully answer that question. I will not be able either to fully answer all the questions that may come up in your mind, but there are three factors that are involved here. His baptism was His way of identifying with the sinful people for whom He came. By means of His baptism, all righteousness might be fulfilled. As they needed baptism, so He, by baptism, identified with them.

Jesus insisted on having the people see that He publicly identified with the people in need. He was one with them. At the same time, the Spirit of God throughout the whole Old Testament era was the equipping Spirit. When the Spirit came upon him, the King was able to do his royal duties. When the Spirit came upon the prophets, they were able to speak in various ways and they received the Word. When men were anointed, they were equipped. The Spirit was the great enabling force. Now Jesus, in His human nature, needed the equipping of the Spirit. He comes to us as a human being, and the tremendous task that awaited Him called for every possibility that He had for being the great redeemer, the great victorious one. So that is an aspect.

I think there are theological questions here that we could spend a couple hours on and it would be great just to have a seminar discussing this, "Why did Jesus need the Spirit, from this equipping point of view?"

Thirdly, in His baptism, Jesus is given the divine sanction, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him." When the Spirit descended there was also the voice. The Spirit and the Word come together and the Christ is equipped and sanctioned by the very King of heaven and earth, God Himself. "Listen to Him." He is sanctioned as the Messiah.

These are three factors that need to be considered. You may have others and you may want to think long and deeply about this. What is unfortunate, from our modern point of view, is that we do not find more discussion about Jesus' baptism when we go on reading through the Bible. The Spirit is there and He says as we read here from Luke 4, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me." Jesus refers to His baptism and He calls it an anointing. But beyond that, we do not have much discussion about this in the New Testament. But we do have many references to what the Holy Spirit does and how the Holy Spirit is so important for regeneration and to give us entrance into the kingdom of heaven and how He will unite us. I wish the New Testament spoke more on Jesus' baptism, but I cannot find it.

The next factor is Jesus' temptation. Vos says on page 303, "What we usually call the temptation of Jesus at first seems to lie like an erratic block in the forefield of His public ministry." What a strange situation. Jesus has been baptized. Jesus has been equipped. Jesus has received the sanction of the heavenly Father. Jesus has identified Himself with sinful people in need of baptism. Why this strange experience of being driven by this very Spirit into the desert? Vos puts the "temptation of Jesus" in quotes because he correctly prefers to speak of the probation, tying it with Adam and Eve's experience.

We speak of the probation of Adam and Eve, but was it? Was He driven into the desert because He was likened to Adam and Eve? Was He in the same situation and condition? No and yes. He is God. He is sanctioned by the Father. He is sinless. Adam and Eve were sinless too. Adam and Eve were given a great royal commission to be God's vice-regents on earth, to represent Him, to have dominion, to rule, and to bring out the great wonders of the creation. But they failed when confronted by the devil. That was the first Adam. Now what does the second Adam do? The second Adam is sinless and yet He is burdened with sin because He carries our sin. He is under the curse because He came and, in His baptism, identified with we who are under the curse, so it is not the same.

But it is the same in some respects. Jesus in His temptation, in His probation, had to show that He was able to be victor over the prince of the parasite kingdom. The devil simply wanted Jesus to identify with fallen humanity in more ways than one. He had identified with them, and He was human. If only the devil could get Him to be identified as a sinful human, then the great parasite kingdom would have no further opposition. Then the parasite kingdom could take over the whole cosmic kingdom and it would be able to reign supreme and there would be no salvation. He was confronting the devil. There in the wilderness, the battle was fought. Yes, on the cross we speak of Him bearing our sin. There He bore the wrath of God. In the wilderness, He bore the wrath of the devil. He had to face the devil face to face there.

Another difference is that Jesus' temptation was not in a paradise situation. It was in a desert situation. He had no food. He may have been weak due to hunger. "Show that these angels are at Your command. Throw Yourself down. Show that You are the king after all and I will give you all these nations." The devil tempts Him. These temptations have been interpreted in various ways. I will not tell you which one of these fine interpretations, such as those of Vos and Ladd, you should take. Try to include as much of it as you possibly can, but keep the basic factor in mind: The second Adam takes the place of the first Adam. As the first Adam fell, the second Adam had to indicate that though He was burdened and under the curse, though He was in a desert situation, weak physically, challenged as to His kingship, He confronted the devil and told him what the Word of God says. Isn't that what Jesus did? The Word says, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by the Word that comes from the Lord's mouth," and He used the Word of God to put the devil in his place.

There is an encouraging lesson for us in that too. If we want to be Christ like, we should use the Word of God when the temptations and the struggles and the trials come.

Jesus came forth from the desert, incarnate, baptized a victor. He came out of the desert a victor over the parasite kingdom. He proved that He was the one who could indeed usher in the kingdom over the powers of the parasite kingdom. He met the enemy face to face and He made Himself available to him, and He came out the victor. This ends the first epoch of what I call the various covenantal epochs of revelation, the initiation of the New Testament covenant. The new covenant has been initiated with Christ's birth, Christ's baptism, Christ's temptation. In Luke 4, when we read that He goes to His hometown, that is in a sense when the second epoch begins. That is where He begins His preaching ministry by announcing the kingdom.

People have made distinctions between the redemptive kingdom and the cosmic kingdom. Jesus makes no such distinctions. He speaks of "The kingdom." Later, Paul does as well; he speaks of "the kingdom." There is no emphasis on an institution, on a royal institution. There is no emphasis on the domain. As we mentioned before in the Old Testament, we see there are these four factors: the king, the throne, the reign, and the domain. When Jesus preaches the kingdom, the domain does not take an institutional, political dimension of any kind. It does not take a legalistic dimension. When Jesus comes, He does not speak about His throne, nor the domain, but He does speak about Himself and His reign. Ladd, Vos, Ridderbos, Marshall, and others, have dealt with this concept of the kingdom. They all emphasize that Jesus comes as the king and He exercises the power of a king. He comes exercising regal authority, regal power, regal prerogatives and He brings regal blessings. He comes as a king, preaching and exercising kingship without emphasis on the throne or the domain.

When Jesus introduces Himself, He does not often use the word "kingdom." In Luke He does. Matthew introduces Him saying, "He came preaching the kingdom." Mark says the same. But Jesus put much emphasis on the spiritual nature. He wanted to impress on the people the spiritual nature of the kingdom that He came to bring into fuller greater reality. He came bringing Himself and His regal authority, influence and blessing. All this had to be seen in the broader perspective of the spiritual rather than the physical or material. Jesus also preached entrance into the kingdom. How do you enter the kingdom? Repent. John the Baptist preached it. Jesus preached it. But His emphasis was, as in Luke 4, on presenting Himself and that people would humble themselves and receive Him. He called on them, in the context of obedience and faith, to "Obey Me, repent, obey Me, believe in Me." Thus you enter the kingdom, thus you come into relationship with the King and come under His beneficent reign, under His authority, under His power, and receive His blessing.

That is what Jesus came teaching, like the words to the hymn "Take Time to Be Holy." He came telling us, "Take time to be holy, speak often with your Lord, in all things abide with Him, whatever the circumstance in life may be." He wanted a holy people. He wanted to sanctify people. He wanted a people that could enter into the closest fellowship with Him. Obedience and faith lead to not just righteousness, but to sanctification. Jesus did emphasize that. That introduces me to life in the kingdom. Jesus preached life in the kingdom.

I hope we know what the beatitudes are. I do not like it when my fellow Christians talk about the beatitudes as kind of a legalistic document for the kingdom. The beatitudes are not rules. They are guidelines for kingdom living, for trusting and obeying, that your life may be rich, full and blessed within the kingdom. These are guidelines for the kingdom. They do not replace the Ten Commandments; rather they give a fuller expression to what the old covenant requirements were for living and fellowship with the Lord. Jesus taught His disciples how to pray in the Lord's Prayer, and this



helps us in a similar way to the beatitudes. The life of the kingdom is beautifully set forth in many of the parables. The parables teach us about the character of the kingdom and so on, but most of the parables also give you insight into how to live under King Jesus and what to expect under His reign. Many of the parables set forth the tremendous tension we will have. Not all parables are the same, but that is one of the common features.

Jesus also preached His own death and resurrection. We will talk more about that in the next few lectures. In Matthew, Jesus says, “Who do people say that I am?” His disciples replied saying, “Some say You are this, some say You are that.” Jesus says, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter replies, “You are the Christ,” Matthew 16. Jesus says, “Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, Peter. I will build My church.” How will He build His church? By going to the cross. He preaches His death and resurrection, and then He says that He will build His church. He preaches His death and resurrection, but He also preaches the great and glorious outcome of all this, the great consummation. This is in Mark 16, a debated passage in Scripture, but it is also in Matthew 24 and 25. That gives us the great eschatological perspective Jesus preached Himself. He preached the kingdom. He preached the life in the kingdom. He preached the atonement that He Himself would bring, the resurrection and the great and glorious consummation. All that the Old Testament prophets have preached as covenant promises, as covenant assurances, Jesus preached them and said, “In Me these will all be fulfilled.” So when He sits at the first communion table, He can say, “This now is the blood of the covenant that will seal to you all the Old Testament promises; I will make these a reality for you here and now.”

I have a few other points that we will briefly cover in the few minutes we have left. Jesus came and He worked miracles. By performing miracles He established the blessed reality that He is Lord, He is God. The miracles were confirming signs of the kingdom. Remember, the kingdom emphasis is now on the personality, on Jesus Himself and His reign. The miracles were not primarily for those who benefited from them. The miracles as I understand them were there as signs of the presence of the kingdom of God. Jesus performed miracles because He was God and King and Lord over nature. He was Lord over the satanic empire and He was Lord over all the results of sin—misery, death, sickness. He was Lord over all of it. He could claim these titles, but people being weak and unbelieving needed the signs. In certain circumstances, Jesus selected unique situations and specific people to prove that He was the king over creation.

Jesus’ first miracle, according to John, was the turning of water into wine. That was a miracle in the area of creation. That was not, in a sense, a redemptive miracle. I have heard people try to make it a redemptive miracle. You could say that Jesus was proving that He could be Lord over death, but He first establishes Himself as a Lord over creation. He comes as the king of creation, He comes as the Lord of nature; He comes as the one who can control the minute aspects of our everyday life. He does it in a beautiful situation, a marriage situation, by turning water into wine. But in so doing He establishes his lordship, so do not use this miracle to preach about the wedding or about whether or not we ought to drink wine. That is not the point of that miracle at all. Jesus establishes His Lordship in this His first miracle. He is the king of the cosmos. He has the cosmos under control. He has but to speak the word, fill the jugs with water, and wine is there.

Jesus is the Lord over the parasite kingdom. He had won the victory over the devil. The demons are subjects of Satan (Vos, page 331). But by the Spirit of God He challenges every demon that challenges Him or that is making wreckage of human life. He says, “Get out!” Evil spirits obeyed Him, and the people were amazed. They would not have been amazed at that if they had known their Old Testament Scriptures, but He demonstrated that the parasite kingdom’s time was done. He had but to speak the word and the subjects of the devil, the emissaries and servants of the parasite kingdom, were at His

command. Under His domination He could do with them as He sovereignly willed. He was also sovereign over the results of sin in our life and the effects of the devil working in tandem with our sin; sickness and death. Jesus came working miracles, proving that He could heal the lame. He could heal the sick. He could bring the widow's son back to life. He could bring the brother Lazarus back to life.

Jesus was Lord. He was king. His kingship was over the physical and over the spiritual domain; His miracles demonstrate that. We have talked about miracles before, in the setting of Elijah. He is still king. He was king at the bedside of my little boy when the doctor had already given up. He is Lord. And He carries out His sovereign will to establish His lordship.

Jesus did more. He spoke of the church. He did not give details concerning the church, but He said, "I will build my church," Matthew 16:18. How did He do that? By calling Peter, James, John, and Andrew. He did not say, "Enter the kingdom." He did not say, "Sign on the dotted line and become citizens of an institution." What did He do? He said, "Follow me." He established a relationship between Himself as the head and His followers. They had to identify with Jesus Christ, the king, the victor over Satan, the Lord over the parasite kingdom. "Identify with Me and become co-reigners with Me, co-workers with Me. Go out, disciples." The disciples were given power to perform miracles to indicate that they were indeed part of the kingdom and He builds His Church. He builds His community of believers, His community of servants; His community of fellow God-appointed people in this world. That's what the church is. The church is not the kingdom, but the church that Jesus builds is an integral part of the kingdom in a broader dimension. The church can be looked upon as part of the domain, but it is more than that. The church are the believers that are intimately united with the king and who go forth in His name, exercising wherever they can by word and deed the royal prerogatives of King Jesus, speaking the Word of King Jesus, the Redeemer. They do the deeds of mercy and goodness that Jesus, the King, the Great Redeemer did.

The term "mediator" is not used in the synoptic Gospels. They say Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, the messiah—that word is used a number of times. But the synoptic Gospels are clear in setting forth that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Mediator. He is the seed of the woman, who comes to carry out the covenant demands. He administers the covenant as the kingdom is established. The covenant by implication is in all that He said and all that He did, indicating that He was God's covenant agent. He was more. He was the Lord of the covenant, but He was also the atoning priest of the covenant for he said, "This is the blood of the covenant that has been shed for all of you." No, the term *berith* is not used often in the New Testament. It is used often in the book of Hebrews because the people to whom the letter was addressed were confused and needed to hear that this is the era of the new covenant. But Jesus introduces it, or refers to it very clearly, when He says, "This is the blood of the new covenant. All that I am doing, all that I have said and done, I am doing this as mediator of the covenant, I am carrying out the administrative dimension. I am bringing forth all the blessings and I am carrying the curse of the covenant by the shedding of My blood."

The three concepts are here. They tie in together with the Old Testament and they form the heart: the kingdom, the covenant, and the mediator (and as mediator, He administers the kingdom through God's appointed means). The three concepts: kingdom, covenant and mediator form the golden cable that unites the New Testament inseparably with the Old Testament. There is a new era, the new covenant.