

August 29, 2004

The Beheading of John the Baptist

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In response to a heresy asserting "that there is no resurrection from the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:12), the Apostle Paul devoted the longest chapter in his whole corpus to the thesis that the resurrection pertains to the very essence of the Gospel.

In describing this Gospel Paul twice uses the expression, "according to the Scriptures": "For I delivered to you first of all that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (15:3-4).

The "Scriptures" to which he refers are, of course, what today we call the Old Testament, and it is no small part of the significance of this passage that it affirms the internal, theological relationship of the Old Testament to the Gospel. That is to say, the Hebrew "Scriptures" are an integral component of the Gospel itself. If the Old Testament is left out of the Gospel, so to speak, we are no longer talking about the true Gospel, the Gospel in its integrity. It would be, rather, what Paul elsewhere calls "a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6).

We Christians hold that the pursuit of either Testament on its own, apart from the other, is theologically unwarranted. The Old Testament cannot be correctly understood in its fullness, we contend, without the New Testament, nor can the New Testament be correctly understood apart from the Old. Both together form a single, theologically indivisible canon of divinely inspired literature.

The Jews divide their canonical Scriptures into three parts: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. To these we Christians insist on adding a fourth section, the Apostolic Writings, commonly called the New Testament, and we contend that these four sections of Holy Scripture belong together. It is our thesis that these four are parts of an integral canonical work. They are theologically inseparable, dependent on one another for their true meaning, and any part of them without the others represents a theological distortion.

It is part of the Christian argument against Judaism, therefore, that the latter has truncated the canonical process. Judaism has an incomplete Bible (as also do Christians who neglect the Old Testament).

The integration of the inspired Hebrew Scriptures into the substance of the Gospel is indicated in Luke's version of the Great Mandate. Luke makes the Christian understanding of the Old Testament the very context of Jesus' sending out of His disciples to preach repentance and remission of sins "in His name to all nations." In the preamble to this mission Jesus announces "that all things must be fulfilled which

were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me." Then, introducing the Great Mandate, "He opened their understanding that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Luke 24:44-47).

The Acts of the Apostles testifies to that apostolic "understanding" of the Scriptures as they pertain to the proclamation of the Gospel. For example, Luke had mentioned that Jesus interpreted the Psalms for the Apostles when He sent them forth. Thus, in the very first sermon delivered by a Christian on the day of Pentecost, two psalms are quoted as integral to the message of the Gospel (Acts 2:25-35). Just like Paul at Corinth, that is to say, Peter at Jerusalem insisted that Jesus rose from the dead "according to the Scriptures."

In the sermon next recorded in Acts, Peter invokes "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" as the God of the Christian Gospel (3:13). Stephen, in his own presentation of the Gospel, begins by announcing that "the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham" and then runs through much of the history of the Old Testament, all the way to Solomon, before he so much as mentions the name of Jesus (7:2-59). We find this same appeal to the Old Testament in the Gospel as preached by Philip (8:32-33) and by Paul (13:15-37).

Likewise in their first great crisis, when the Apostles were obliged to determine the precise significance of the Gospel in the Christian life, we see James turning to the Old Testament for guidance (15:13-19).

In short, the Gospel is not something that "stands on its own." It is the crowning chapter of an integral and much longer book.

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