

Paradox in the Gospel: some reflections for evangelisation today

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It is written for www.cte.org.uk and section www.cte.org.uk/evangelisation.
Please note, this is a personal reflection and not an agreed CTE publication.

Introduction

Two months ago, in a preparatory paper, I concluded that this study might have a working title *Opposite Truths*.¹ However, after Kellyanne Conway spoke to NBC News about 'Alternative Facts' I decided to go back to my original title of 'Paradox in the Gospel'!

As a way of introducing 'paradox', another title suggestion was *Truth in Tension*. This also now has additional connotations - but I'll stick with it for an introductory quote for this personal reflection. 'Truth in Tension' (like 'Opposite Truths'), is quite a good summary definition of 'paradox'.

As the audience for this discussion paper may be chiefly colleagues in the ecumenical network and visitors to the website of *Churches Together in England (CTE)*,² let me quote an example of 'Truth in Tension' from a key text for the quest for unity written when CTE was formed.

Truth in Tension is a chapter heading in the book *Together on the Way: a Theology of Ecumenism* published in 1990.³ Christopher J Ellis explores the theology of the Trinity: 'So the time-honoured phrase "three in one and one in three" is not so much an attempt to nail God down to a set of words, as to hold within the paradox of human language the vision of God as greater than anything we can imagine'.⁴

This paper explores such theology and paradox, though from a different starting point: that of mission, evangelisation, and sharing the gospel in England today.

I'll first consider the written Gospels and the different facets of the gospel message from Jesus. I start here because I really want to go in to some detail to make a solid point, especially for readers for whom biblical authority is critically important, to establish the fact often ignored in the church, that there is such a thing as paradox in the Gospels and the gospel.⁵

On a personal note, 'paradox' has interested me for a long time, especially since reading a book by the Benedictine monk, Dom Cyprian Smith OSB. He explored the spiritual life as taught by Meister Eckhart in the book *The Way of Paradox*.⁶ This triggered the topic of my MA Dissertation and the writing of a Grove booklet called *Paradox in the Gospel?*⁷ I now want to revisit the book and remove the question mark, exploring how paradox in the gospel helps us both in our personal discipleship as followers of Jesus, and in the cause of Christian unity for which he prayed.⁸

Note: As the concept of paradox is new to many, I propose content for a possible introductory course re Paradox in the Gospel in an Appendix to this paper.

Background to this paper

As I reflect on my 45 years of following Jesus, I recall that one of the many aspects that helped me start the journey was that of 'opposites'. I had lots of concerns then about things like world famine and the nuclear threat (called 'Mutually Assured Destruction'), which made me think there was a force for evil. On the basis of Newton's Third Law of physics 'for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction', I concluded that there must also be a force for good. Do forgive the crude logic, but at least as a teenager it helped me believe in God!

I mention this as the dynamic of 'opposites' relates very much to the concept of 'paradox', I came to properly explore later.

Commissioned in 1979 in the Church Army⁹ after 3 years training, it has been my life's work, in one way or another, to share the gospel with people who have not heard and experienced it. Mainly in network and coordinating roles, I have the privilege of working for Churches Together in England (CTE)¹⁰ with the opportunity of some study leave to write this reflection.

You are reading the result of that study.

In passing, I was interested to read from a collection of theological essays – coincidentally written in the same year as my commissioning - 'paradox is a somewhat loose concept, of which I have not found much serious discussion'¹¹. A note to that comment refers to an article and a book (*Christianity and Paradox* by R W Hepburn in 1958) but otherwise, 'there are no articles with "paradox" in the title in either *Religious Studies* or *The International Journal of Philosophy and Religion*'.¹²

I am interested that since 1979 there are now at least 28 books and articles relating to the topic. Most notably in terms of reaching a new audience is *Paradoxology* by Krish Kandiah,¹³ read by young adults from our local church after attending the major festival *Soul Survivor*.¹⁴ It is available from the *Soul Survivor* online shop.¹⁵

There is a Bibliography at the end of this paper, and Endnotes for references. There are more quotes from some of these books, in a preparation paper hosted alongside this discussion paper on: www.cte.org.uk/paradoxinthegospel.

Paradox

Recognising that the word confuses people - illustrated by the friend who thought 'paradox' was a headache tablet - let's start with the dictionary definition.

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines paradox as: 'a seemingly absurd or contradictory statement, even if actually well founded'... from Latin paradoxum from Greek paradoxon neut. Adj used as a noun (as PARA- doxa 'opinion').

It is, therefore a 'contradictory statement' with tension in between two opposing statements, which are 'well founded' and held together in creative tension.

Interestingly, 'paradoxon' is the word used for the unexpected 'wonderful works' of Jesus, observed by the Roman historian Josephus, when quoted by Eusebius in Antiquities 18.3.3.¹⁶ Significantly, then, paradox was one of the first comments ever made about Jesus by someone outside the church.

In my Grovebook I wrote:

If a working definition is the 'co-existence of opposites with the tension in between' then, I believe, elements of the principle of paradox can be found in many aspects of the gospel message. For example: the 'virgin Mother'; Jesus the God man; the 'alpha and omega' the 'lion and the lamb'; the 'shepherd and lamb'; the 'victor and victim'. These are exciting and fascinating biblical double dynamics.¹⁷

- Can you see the principle of paradox in the above examples?
- Can you list your own examples from the four Gospel books?
- Can you think of examples in the gospel message?

Paradox in the Gospels

First, acknowledging that the actual word 'paradox' is not used in the Bible, let me start this detailed section about examples of paradox in the Gospels with an interesting quote by Charles Simeon:

As wheels in a complicated machine may move in opposite directions and yet subserve one common end, so may truths (of scripture) apparently opposite be perfectly reconcilable with each other, and equally subserve the purposes of God in the accomplishment of our salvation.¹⁸

Although it is not clear which 'truths' Simeon was referring to, I think there are many examples, including the well-known pair of quotes from Jesus which, when read together, are opposite:

'For whoever is not against us is for us' (Mark 9: 40)

'He who is not with me is against me' (Matthew 12:30 and Luke 11:23)

The influential missiologist, Roland Allen provides further examples from the written gospel when he 'grapples with this paradox'.¹⁹

The same Christ who says in the Gospels that He is the only way to the Father (John 14:6) tells the parable of the judgment of the nations (Mt 25:31-46), where those who had shown love and concern for the needy are welcomed into the Kingdom. The same Peter who said that there was salvation in no one other than Christ (Acts 4:12) also said, when faced with Cornelius and the Gentile Centurion, that God accepts, in every nation, all those who 'fear God and work righteousness' (Acts 10:35). The same Paul who is conscious of the lost position of those without Christ (Eph 2:1-3) also says that God will reward with eternal life those who seek it by patiently doing good (Rom 2:7). Paul's sermons at Lycaonia (Acts 14) and at the Acropolis (Acts 17) could also be quoted, as well as his reference to those Gentiles who 'do by nature the things contained in the law' (Rom 2:14). Each passage could have particular context ... yet stubborn residue remains' of which we must take account ... 'if the Bible can hold what we call 'predestination' and 'freewill' together, it equally and

*obviously, can hold these other truths together too, but in a way that dose not cut the nerve of evangelism.*²⁰

There is an inferred paradox in Jesus' words to Nicodemus often used by evangelists today, 'I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again' (John 3:3). The shocking paradox of the words becomes more obvious when Nicodemus asks, 'how can a man be born when he is old?' (v4) Jesus' reply resolves the question when he talks about a spiritual birth in v6.

Another inferred paradox is contained in the text sometimes described as 'the gospel in a nutshell': John 3:16. 'God so loved the world that gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life'. In my experience, the evangelist will refer to the message for the individual, without usually referring to the cosmic dimension of the gospel, 'For God so loved the *world*'.

Ben Witherington III, in a commentary on the Gospel of Mark, says:

*Mark's world is full of paradox, full of the least, the last, and the lost becoming the most, the first and the found. It is the world where children, not wise adults, are the model of how to enter God's dominion. It is a world full of surprises and reversals.*²¹

If you are interested in a detailed analysis of paradox in Mark's Gospel, read the academic text in the *Library of New Testament Studies* by Laura C Sweat, called *The Theological Role of Paradox in the Gospel of Mark*.²² Sweat says, 'this story takes winding turns and creative routes, marked by street signs of enigmas, secrecy, and mystery. Contradictory statements are simultaneously true. In this way, the audience may find, in the words of Neils Bohr, that the opposite of one profound truth is not a falsehood: it is another profound truth'.²³

In *Paradox in the Gospel?* I provided a systematic summary from just one of the Gospel books to see if there were any examples of paradox. It could have been any one of the four, but I chose Matthew.

I know that some examples (e.g. the Virgin Mother) can be described as 'pure paradox', while others (e.g. the Spirit leading Jesus in to the desert to be tempted by the Devil) are examples of 'the principle of paradox'. Sufficient to say I think this list contains examples of opposites, tensions, contradictions, irony, antimony (contradictions in law), oxymoron ('pointedly foolish' phrase), as well as 'paradox'. In each of these examples we have contradictory, 'absurd', or 'both/and' statements where opposites co-exist at the same time.

The following statements repay close reflection:

1. The virgin Mother 1:23
2. The Spirit leading Jesus to the desert to be tempted by the devil 4:1
3. The 'future' Kingdom 'at hand' 4:17
4. Beatitudes e.g. 'blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God' etc in Chapter 5.
5. The least in the Kingdom is the greatest 5:19
6. Healing was sought, but sin was forgiven 9:2
7. Jesus brings peace *and* a sword 10:34
8. Lose life to find it 10:39
9. Load is heavy, but the yoke is easy and the burden light 11:30

10. The Law was fulfilled *and* changed e.g. Sabbath 12:1-14
 11. Five thousand fed with a boy's lunch 14:13-21
 12. Jesus sent only to 'lost sheep' of Israel – yet Gentiles too 15:24
 13. Peter the 'rock' who denied Jesus 16:18
 14. 'Tell no-one', yet go and make disciples 16:20/28:19
 15. Losing life and gaining it 16:25
 16. To be forgiven, forgive others 18:35
 17. Children and the Kingdom 'belongs to such as these' 19:13-15
 18. Give to the poor for treasure in heaven 19:21
 19. The first shall be last, and last first 19:30
 20. The King coming on a colt 21:5
 21. The stone rejected is the cornerstone 21:42
 22. Called and chosen; who were the banquet guests? 22:10
 23. Greatest will be the least and the humble exalted 23:12
 24. Pharisees doing right things yet 'blind guides' 23:24
 25. The outer 'righteous' but inner 'hypocrite' 23:28
- Which do you consider to be 'pure paradox' in the above?
 - What 'principle of paradox' do you see in each?
 - Can you add examples from the other Gospels?

During a seminar at a conference at Lee Abbey, delegates understood the principle of paradox as they came up with the following, some of which have been quoted in the Introduction to this paper e.g. the alpha and omega ... the lion and the lamb ... the victor and victim ... Jesus possesses everything yet nothing ... He is the 'wounded healer' ... 'service and freedom' ... 'faith in the resurrection of the crucified Christ' ... 'in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female' ... 'living sacrifice' etc.

Finally, to conclude this section, writing from a conservative evangelical perspective is Tom Taylor who is an American pastor and adjunct professor at the Fuller Theological Seminary. His book *Paradox* is a series of chapters exploring 'the contradictions of Jesus' with story and illustration. He writes on p22:

'The person who begins to learn, understand, and accept the paradoxes of Jesus becomes like the man who had been blind from birth, whom Jesus healed on the Sabbath, against then-conventional interpretations of the Jewish law (see John 9). When the blind man was hauled before a court of religious officials who demanded to know the details of the man's healing, he admitted that he didn't know how Jesus had healed him or whether Jesus had acted illegally in doing so. He simply responded, 'Whether he is sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!' (v25).²⁴

Paradox in the gospel message

Jesus did not give us a single definition of 'the gospel'. People were called to follow and respond to Christ in many and various ways. From the fisherman²⁵ to Nicodemus²⁶ and from the Rich Young Ruler²⁷ to the man lowered down through the roof,²⁸ each heard a different message.²⁹ Paul gives us a more systematic explanation of the gospel as it emerged and was passed on from generation to

generation. The gospel we have received has been refined over two millennia, often with extensive periods of debate.

Over that time, many of the great theological themes of the gospel can only be understood by holding together apparent opposites in creative tension. Such tension is important in order to avoid error and heresy; including those which led to the crafting of the Creeds.

Some of these theological themes are, of course, interpreted and practiced with wide diversity by the member churches of Churches Together in England.³⁰ The scope of that variety is beyond the reach and consideration of this paper, but there are 'opposites' to be considered in theology, ecclesiology and practice.

- Baptism is an example. Can you think of others?
- What is your own understanding of 'church'?
- Do you know how your views differ from other Christians?

Consider these examples of paradox in relation to theology:

1. The Trinity, as the central mystery of the Christian faith, asserts that God is both three and one at the same time
2. The Incarnation asserts that Jesus is both God and man at the same time³¹
3. Salvation has both inclusive and exclusive elements. It can be debated whether all, or only some, will be saved, as in the Roland Allan quote above
4. The Kingdom is both now and not yet
5. God can do 'all things' but gives us 'free will'
6. Our salvation results both from God's action and ours, working together
7. We are to preach the gospel, heal the sick, and feed the poor: which comes first and how are they related?
8. Christian vision: from God or human beings?
9. The Church is both a collection of individuals and the Body of Christ
10. The Bible was written by human hand, and 'the hand of God'
11. Peace is central to the Gospel, but Jesus also came to bring a sword
12. We are told to work hard for the Lord, yet 'do not strive' and just trust

Our Christian theology is complex and opposites come together all the time. Theology is a mix of Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and experience. Add to this the different facets of the gospel from the Eastern and Western church; the Roman and Celtic traditions; the Reformed and Pentecostal streams, and the distinctive contributions of different denominations, and we naturally have tensions, even though we seek to be one in Christ.

Hymnody

As a point of interest, one key way in which the various churches have passed on the received gospel is in liturgy and hymnody. At this point it may be interesting to note some of the illustrations of the principle of paradox in the liturgy and hymns of the different traditions.

In the words of St Patrick's breastplate for example: 'Christ before me, Christ behind me' illustrates a 'both/and' perspective in a traditional hymn. Highly paradoxical is the verse in the new song *The Splendour of the King*, by Chris Tomlin that quotes scripture: 'The Godhead Three in One, Father, Spirit, Son, The Lion and the Lamb'.³²

The song titles, 'Servant King' and 'Meekness and Majesty' illustrate the principle of paradox. Even the song sung by children, 'One More Step' contains the lines 'you are older than the world can be, you are younger than the life in me' and the line 'ever old and ever new', contain the principle too. Probably the most classic quotes of paradox in hymns are: 'both priest and victim'³³ and the 'immortal dies'.³⁴ Note here that poetic phrasing is a good way to illustrate paradox.

- Can you think of other hymns and songs from your tradition that quote an example of paradox in a poetic phrase?

At this point, let me introduce you to an interesting, immensely practical, concept sometimes called *The Law of the Excluded Middle*.

'The Law of the Excluded Middle'

The general principle of paradox can be found in classical philosophy. Here I want to introduce one of the three classic laws of thought, known as the *Law of the Excluded Middle*. The earliest form appears in Aristotle's discussion about self-contradiction.³⁵ The *Law of the Excluded Middle* states that, for all propositions p , it is impossible for both p and not p to be true.³⁶

This has been the basis on which simple mathematical formulae are founded, and has application in many areas of life where we say a situation or proposition is 'either/or'. This may be fine in many instances, but not in others when we have inadvertently excluded a middle option.

Of course, some things are a case of A or B! If I offer you a drink of tea or coffee I would be surprised if you wanted both at the same time. Traffic on the road and trains on the track vividly illustrate that often we cannot compromise – and accidents soon happen if vehicles are on the wrong side. In many instances in life the options are either A or B: there is one side or the other with clear demarcation in between.

However, sometimes, options are possible, even essential, and seemingly incompatible at the same time. It is then too simple (or a denial) to say 'either this or that' in much of the complexity of life. This is amply illustrated by current news headlines in relation to Europe and Brexit; decisions of the new American President; the Sexuality Debate in General Synod of the Church of England, to name but three debates that have polarised opinions. The *Law of the Excluded Middle* can have profound practical implications, and needs to be part of the national, and international, discourse.

As we shall see later, in order to keep a big picture view of scripture, the great theological themes of the gospel cannot be distinguished as 'either this or that', but often as 'both and' too. An obvious example is the different emphasis given to Law and Grace in the Old and New Testaments. Both are important biblical themes and need to be held together in creative tension together.

There is no 'either/or' when it come to the crucifixion and resurrection either; they are both critical aspects of the gospel. It is the same when we talk of imminence and transcendence. As soon as we apply the *Law of the Excluded Middle* we are in danger of drifting to an extreme position, which, in theology, eventually leads to heresy. The creeds are carefully crafted to avoid that tendency.

With that in mind let's now look at some reflections of the above study for evangelisation.

Some reflections for evangelisation

Having established that there is paradox in the gospel and evidence for the 'co-existence of opposites and the tension in between' in much of Jesus teaching, I now want to suggest some implications of this for evangelisation today.

The points are not in any particular order.

Paradox and personal faith

First of all we need to recognise elements of paradox in our own Christian life and calling. As one colleague said, 'I am a walking paradox', while another, 'Ah paradox, yes, I can't live with it, and I can't live without it!'

Like St Paul who described a 'thorn in the flesh' (2 Corinthians 12:7), even committed and highly motivated Christians have issues to manage and contradictions between what we should - and actually - do. Every Christian is tempted, and even though forgiven, temptations stay. The main themes of 'money, sex and power' for which monastic orders have rules of 'poverty, chastity and obedience', are well identified as issues Christians have to face, for good reason.³⁷

A theological report, *The Mystery of Salvation* identifies, 'In our contemporary society it is increasingly the case that secular people seek autonomous forms of self fulfillment envisaged in individualistic terms'³⁸ while Gibbs and Coffey observe 'modern young adults cobble together a pic' n' mix spirituality from an amazing variety of sources. Seeming contradictions between the sources are simply overlooked or held in paradox'.³⁹

In this regard it was interesting to read this from recent research conducted among young Christian adults in America:

In the early months of the music downloading explosion – the illegal 'pirating' of songs digitally – the Christian music industry asked Barna Group to explore the attitude of young Christian. Did they think that music downloading and 'ripping' CDs for their friends was wrong? If not, what might be said to convince them otherwise? I am not often floored by the data, but the study we completed qualified as a shocker. By large margins, most Christian teenagers did not see illegal music downloading as a moral issue – or if it was, they considered it a matter of fairness and loyalty to their friends rather than of right and wrong. Many of the young people we interviewed felt it was more important to be fair and loyal to their peers than to be loyal to the

*industry... the students we interviewed had nothing negative to say about their parents or the Bible but they also saw little connection between these sources of authority and their attitude or behaviors. This finding suggested that many young people maintain split selves – they are capable of holding contradictory beliefs and behaviors in multiple, even conflicting, categories.*⁴⁰

To categorise and compartmentalise different strands in our lives is, on the one hand essential to life. Indeed, it is a positive skill, which helps us manage the complexity of life from driving and speaking on the phone (hands free of course!) to many other examples of 'multitasking'. Indeed, it is a skill we need to survive. To quote Gibbs and Coffey again, 'the 'inability to live with paradox will result in paralysis'.⁴¹

However, on the other hand, to compartmentalise can be negative. The natural ability to hold different aspects of our lives in tension is also the reason why brilliant preachers can have extra marital affairs and treasurers can steal from the charities they serve. I believe understanding paradox can help us understand ourselves and potentially save us from getting in a moral mess.

Ephesians 2: 8, like fifty or more texts in the Bible, reminds us that we are sinners saved by grace: 'For it is by grace that you have been saved'. Note, there is a paradox here to, in that we are still sinners, as in Martin Luther's famous phrase 'simul justus et peccator' (translated: 'simultaneously justified and sinful at the same time'). All this raises various questions for further reflection, including:

- Do we recognise and fully appreciate paradox in our own everyday life and Christian faith?
- How can that help us manage our own internal contradictions?
- What can we do – with God's help – (note: both/and) to shift the balance to become more Christ like?

Stages of faith

Roy Crowne is one of a number of friends and colleagues who have helped shape this reflection. As an evangelist he has been the national Director of Youth for Christ⁴² and is currently Director of Hope Together⁴³. Roy has been instrumental in many young people and adults discovering faith and following Jesus and recently said, 'as you go on with Christ you are likely to face three disappointments. First, you'll be disappointed in the church, then you'll be disappointed with other Christians, and third, you'll be disappointed with God'.

I quoted Roy in a conversation with another Christian who added, 'yes, and there is a fourth disappointment - I also feel disappointed with myself'.

To cope with these disappointments and to make sense of being a Christian over a period of time, it is helpful, I believe, to be reminded that we go through 'stages of faith'. These stages can be like stages in human development (infancy, early childhood, adolescence and adulthood), as explored by the psychologist James W Fowler in relation to faith and maturity in Christ.

Fowler wrote *Stages of Faith* in 1981, starting what has been called 'Faith Development' theory. Widely read, discussed, argued and interpreted by other

academics, I believe Fowler's 4th stage of faith is helpful here, as it is sometimes called 'Either/Or Faith'. The 5th stage is 'Both/And Faith'⁴⁴ and has been described as, 'keeping in tension the paradoxes and polarities of faith and life'.⁴⁵

Fowler writes, 'Stage 5 accepts as axiomatic that truth is more multidimensional and organically interdependent than most theories or accounts of truth can grasp. Religiously, it knows that the symbols, stories, doctrines and liturgies offered by its own or other traditions are inevitably partial, limited to a particular people's experience of God and incomplete'.⁴⁶

Fowler likens Stage 5 faith to 'mid-life' and says 'Alive to paradox and the truth in apparent contradictions this stage tries to unify opposites in mind and experience'.⁴⁷

- Can you identify which stage of faith you have reached?
- Does the concept of 'stages of faith' find expression in your church?
- Are there different styles of 'faith development' in our various churches?

Leaving church and 'giving up' on God

There have been a number of studies about Christians leaving church from research and conferences about 'Lapsed Catholics' to *Gone but not forgotten* by Richter and Francis in 1998.⁴⁸ Recently *You Lost Me*⁴⁹ researched young adults in America, while *The Invisible Church*⁵⁰ is from the Church of Scotland. Interestingly, each suggests that though many people leave church, by no means all give up on belief in God. This is why the Church of Scotland report is called *The Invisible Church*.

All of these studies suggest a range of reasons why Christians leave church and some 'give up on God'. Personally, I have been challenged as a commissioned evangelist, not so much by conversations with non-Christians coming in to church, as by committed Christians on the way out. One friend, after two marriage breakdowns, put it succinctly: 'after all I've gone through, how can I believe in a God like that?'

Of course, there have always been followers of Jesus who have stopped being a disciple. Jesus himself spoke of the narrow way⁵¹ and two of his chosen 12 illustrate the difficulty of keeping faith. Judas, of course who went much further and betrayed Jesus,⁵² while Peter, in a temporary lapse, denied Jesus in the courtyard.⁵³

Jesus himself told the telling story of the Sower and some of the seed which fell on stony ground,⁵⁴ while others get tangled up with weeds, or burnt up by the sun. There is the hint or suggestion (don't be too mathematical) that only a quarter will actually survive, producing deep roots and bearing much fruit.

Whilst fully accepting that many will hear the word of God and not follow Jesus, and respecting the reasons why Christians sometimes decide to leave church, I am left with a continuing concern. I know that Jesus' teaching is about coming to God and with the faith of a child, 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven',⁵⁵ but we are also to grow up. 'When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me'.⁵⁶

I believe one reason people leave church and 'give up' on God is because they have not reached an adult stage of faith. If this is the case the church, in all denominations, has a responsibility to consider how it helps Christians to grow in Christ. The practicalities may be difficult, but maybe there is a model in Jesus and the disciples, in terms of pastoral care, teaching, and – in today's world - coaching and mentoring, that may be of assistance in this task of helping Christians manage the difficulties and complex questions of faith.

- Are you observing Christians leaving church?
- Are these people also 'giving up on God' or seeking to live with integrity as Christians not in church?
- Are there things your church can do to stop people leaving?

Implications for sharing the gospel

The way Jesus engaged with his audience was often in dialogue, questioning, puzzles and paradox, while we often reduce the gospel to a linear explanation and call for response. The many examples of paradox in the gospel should drive us to thinking critically about how we present the gospel today.

This real example from an evangelistic leaflet is not untypical of how some evangelists present the gospel in literature and preaching:

'Jesus always wants to heal people and set them free' ... 'receiving Jesus is the greatest miracle! He doesn't just bring healing but forgiveness and a new life, a new family, a new father, and real peace' ... 'Without Jesus you are lost. He is calling on you today. He wants to come into your life. He calls you to put him first in all things and allow him to change you and enable you to reach your full potential' ... What will you do with Jesus? Will you just get a little blessing from him, or a healing? Or will you let salvation come to your house today? ... Salvation means peace, protection, blessing, deliverance, healing and more.' Quoting Rev 3:20 he says 'Jesus is outside your life and wants to come in, you can open the door to him by asking him to come into your life. Just pray "Jesus come into my life. Forgive my past. Set me free today. I receive you now. Amen.'

The paucity of paradox in literature designed for enquirers of the Christian faith interests me. I am not surprised that the report *The Mystery of Salvation*⁵⁷ observes 'the modern reader may find mystical language obfuscating'⁵⁸ (I love that word!) while a respondent to a survey I conducted⁵⁹ was probably right: 'to sell something you need a product – I don't think paradox could sell anything!'

Of course, for people living complex lives, complicating the gospel could do more harm than good when people just need to know God's love, forgiveness and new life in Christ. Many people need certainty and assurance, so you might say 'the simpler the better'. However, for others it may not, and they need to engage their intellect and consider the gospel in relation to complexities of life, with all the uncertainties and questions they have. They will need the bigger picture which leaves them thinking and searching for more.

Having written *Sharing Faith the Jesus Way*⁶⁰ that includes a brief chapter on this topic, I believe we need to do more work on the way Jesus engaged his audience with the gospel using the principle of paradox. Here is just an introduction.

You may have heard it said that 'to every complex question there is a simple answer ... which is wrong'. I think that we would see far more interest in the Gospel if Christians are seen to connect with the complexities of life that people experience.

My Grovebook *The 360 Gospel of Jesus*⁶¹ and website www.jesus360.org.uk explores how Jesus addressed specific aspects of a person's need with 'Fifty Top Texts' of different answers Jesus gave to the question 'what must I do to inherit eternal life'. Krish Kandiah is right to have the subtitle to his book *Paradoxology: 'Why Christianity Was Never Meant To Be Simple'*.

Getting the gospel message right for the audience is critically important, both for individuals and congregations. It is too easy to think and say 'Jesus is the answer' when we have not really heard, or given people chance to ask, about their spiritual needs. Often such questions are deeply felt and personal. For such questions, trite answers are insufficient – as are false promises.

'False promises' are examples of 'cheap grace'⁶² illustrated in the children's chorus that goes to the old tune of *Match of the Day*:

*If you know Jesus you'll be happy, as happy as can be.
For he loves everybody, and that means you and me.
It's no good having riches, for all the world to see,
But if you're a friend of Jesus, you'll be happy as can be.*

'As happy as can be' is not what Jesus meant in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5: 1-12 and Luke 6: 20-23) about being 'blessed': see the William Barclay comment in the Endnotes.⁶³ Indeed, I think the false promise quickly leads to disappointment as children (and adults) have certain expectations of what being *happy* is. We have to be very careful how we share the good news of Jesus, especially when presented in relation to complex issues like debt, relationships and illness.

As one colleague put it:

'God is commodified and the offer of the gospel is like Santa Claus, where faith is a gift to be found in all circumstances. It is interesting that the best preachers could be gifted salesman, and few speak of God in an existential sense. For many who hear the gospel presented like this, the 'Magic' and 'selling the dream' is not working, but they still come back and hear the story again'.

- Are we in danger of offering 'cheap grace' when we share the gospel?
- Do we make false promises that could disappoint the new Christian at a later stage of faith?
- How do we connect people's paradoxical lives with paradox in the gospel?

Having said all that, there is another paradox about complex lives and the gospel message – it is both complex and simple at the same time! Without the false promise of 'happy as can be' this is illustrated in another children's chorus quoted by one of the leading theologians of the twentieth century, Karl Barth. Apparently, 'when asked in 1962 (on his one visit to America) how he would summarize the essence of the

millions of words he had published, he replied, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."⁶⁴

Holistic gospel

The Lausanne Covenant agreed that 'World evangelization requires the whole Church to take the whole Gospel to the whole World'.⁶⁵ But what is the whole gospel? Yates quotes Edwards in giving an answer: 'integrated presentation of the gospel, truly incarnated, an approach to the whole person, individual and social, physical and spiritual, horizontal and vertical ... which is 'holistic and integral'.⁶⁶

This whole church/whole gospel/whole world approach is well explored in the *Evangelii Gaudium*.⁶⁷ This was the first Apostolic Exhortation of the then new Pope Francis in 2013, in which there are chapters on proclaiming the gospel and the social dimension. Interestingly, the title illustrates an emphasis to the message, as the English translation puts it, the *Joy of the Gospel*.

The 'Five Marks of Mission'⁶⁸ incorporates a whole picture approach of mission in which evangelism is a part. It includes preaching, teaching, caring, seeking justice and sustaining creation. Holistic mission involves all five Marks.

Another aspect of the 'whole picture' is found in the creedal statement 'One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic' which shapes the theology of the gospel as well as our ecclesiology. In addition, the biblical model of 'one body with many parts'⁶⁹ suggests difference and interdependence in the big 'inclusive' picture, as did Ward when he describes the gospel as a '3D honeycomb or cluster of ideas'.⁷⁰

We need all aspects to get the whole picture, in dynamic oscillation with each other. You could say it is a vision of ecumenism, as Pope Francis reminds us, it is the 'entire people of God' that proclaims the gospel.⁷¹

To illustrate the holistic gospel message and how Jesus knew which aspect of a person's need had to be addressed, read this quote from John V Taylor:

*An essentially biblical emphasis – all too often ignored by the church – is that Christ is Lord and Saviour of the whole of a person, or he is no saviour at all. Because Jesus insisted on seeing the person whole, one could never be sure which aspect of a person's need he would tackle first. Here comes the paralysed man, helpless and obviously sick in body. His friends have bought him hoping for a simple cure, and Jesus talks about the forgiveness of sins. Here on the other hand comes a clear case of spiritual need, an enquirer asking how to gain eternal life, and Jesus gives him an economic answer, telling him how to give away his goods to the poor. Because ultimately Jesus cannot rest content until all of a person's needs are fully met, it does not matter much to him where he starts on the work of salvation.*⁷²

- When asked, how do you explain the gospel?
- What facet of the gospel do you tend to emphasise?
- Which other aspects of Jesus teaching could you also present?

Conclusion

Jesus has been described as the 'Archetypal Paradox'⁷³ and this reflection has sought to consider some of the implications of following him and discovering paradox in the gospel. I am well aware though, that I have stopped well short of where I wanted to go in this study, as an audience through Churches Together in England would also want to explore the implications of paradox for ecumenism. This would be a rich seam indeed for another discussion paper.

Let me finish with a final quote and a prayer.

I have been challenged by some words of Lesslie Newbigin about 'missionary theology in practice', written in 1953 about the ecumenical movement: 'the very name ought to be a safeguard, were it to be remembered that the New Testament *oikumene* never means the worldwide church but always the whole inhabited earth to which the church is sent.'⁷⁴ The 'whole inhabited earth' brings evangelisation and ecumenism together and is a wonderful vision as we pray for God's kingdom in the Lord's Prayer, 'Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven'.

As we began thinking of the United States of America with the quote from Kellyanne Conway speaking to NBC News, let me end with a prayer full of paradox attributed to an anonymous Confederate Soldier of the American Civil War:

'I asked for strength that I might achieve. I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked for health, that I might do greater things. I was given infirmity, that I might do better things. I asked for riches, that I might be happy. I was given poverty, that I might be wise. I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men. I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life. I was given life that I might enjoy all things. I got nothing I asked for – but everything that I had hoped for. Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am among all men, most richly blessed'.

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Bible texts are from the *New International Version*.

Appendix: A Proposed Introductory Course

In my preparation paper I wrote, 'although the topic of "paradox in the gospel" continues to fascinate me, I conclude that the word "paradox" is not one that communicates well with prospective readers'. A number of conversations with colleagues and friends in a personal reading group suggested I find a different word, but none seem adequate to replace it – not even 'opposite truths' and 'truth in tension'.

'Self-contradictory statement' is a definition of paradox from the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, but several colleagues have suggested even that sounds too complicated. So, rather than dispense with the word 'paradox' I now propose an introductory course for a new audience to get to grips with it.

There are three suggested titles so: *The Paradox Course*, or *The Adventure of finding Paradox in the Gospel* or *The Contradictions of Jesus: an Introduction to 'Paradox' in the Gospel*. Whatever the title, the vision will be to help readers discover and explore biblical examples of apparent contradictions in Jesus' teaching.

There may be six sessions, each including a recorded audio-file conversation to listen to, Bible readings and commentary, followed by discussion questions on the following topics:

1. Contradictions in Life
2. Introducing 'Paradox'
3. Paradox in Jesus' teaching
4. Stages of Christian Faith
5. Faith benefits of 'Paradox'
6. Still following The Way

The aim would be to 'explore faith fit for the complexity of life'. Above all, the anticipation is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is both (paradoxically) the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith.⁷⁵

I'd be interested to know what you think about the proposal to produce an introductory course. The only ones I know of are much more in depth. They are:

1. *Praying through Paradox* by Charles Elliot,⁷⁶ from 1987, looked at 2 Corinthians with the following chapter headings: 'Impostors who speak the truth'; 'Unknown men whom all men know'; 'dying ... and we live on'; 'disciplined by suffering but not done to death'; 'In our sorrows we always have cause for joy'; 'Poor ourselves, we bring wealth to many'; and 'Penniless we own the world'.
2. *Paradoxes for Living* by N Graham Standish,⁷⁷ is a relatively new book. This is a course of Bible Study and group exercises, with suggested liturgies under the headings: 'To be strong we have to become weak'; 'To save our lives, we have to lose them'; 'pain is the pathway to joy'; 'To know God we have to know ourselves'; 'in trivial things lie greatness'; 'To become mature, we have to become like children'; 'To live we have to die'; 'to receive we have to give'.

My proposal would draw on these resources but differ considerably as just a basic introduction to paradox in the gospel.

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² www.cte.org.uk

³ *Together on The Way. A Theology of Ecumenism*. Christopher J Ellis. British Council of Churches. 1990. P83.

⁴ *Ibid* p84

⁵ I have adopted the practice of capital 'G' for the four Gospel books and lower case 'g' for gospel, as in the gospel message.

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⁷ *Paradox in the Gospel?* Jim Currin. Grovebooks. 2006

- ⁸ John 17: 20,21
⁹ www.churcharmy.org.uk
¹⁰ www.cte.org.uk
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¹² *ibid.* p58
¹³ <https://krishk.com/tag/paradoxology/>
¹⁴ <http://soulsurvivor.com/>
¹⁵ <http://shop.soulsurvivor.com/books/paradoxology>
¹⁶ For a full discussion see: www.earlychristianwritings.com/testimonium.html
¹⁷ Currin, Jim. *Paradox in the Gospel?* Grovebooks. 2006 p3
¹⁸ Charles Simeon's preface to *Horae Homoelecticae*, quoted in Handley C.G. Moule, *Charles Simeon: Biography of a Same Saint*, London IVP 1965 p79 and Christopher Cocksworth, *Holding Together*. Canterbury Press 2008 pxi
¹⁹ *Progress in Partnership* ACC Brisbane 1986 p48
²⁰ *ibid.*
²¹ Witherington III, Ben, *The Gospel of Mark – A Socio-Rhetorical commentary*, Eerdmans 2001 p60
²² Sweat, Laura C. *The Theological Role of Paradox in the Gospel of Mark*. Bloomsbury. 2001.
²³ *Ibid.* p 27.
²⁴ Taylor, Tom. 2006. *Paradox*. Baker Books. p22
²⁵ 'Come, follow me' as in Matthew 4:19
²⁶ 'No-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again', John 3:3
²⁷ 'Go, sell everything you have', Mark 10: 17-23
²⁸ 'Friend, your sins are forgiven', Luke 5: 17-26
²⁹ For an exploration of this point read my book *The 360 Gospel of Jesus*, www.grovebooks.co.uk
³⁰ www.cte.org.uk/memberchurches
³¹ For a theological exploration of paradox and the Incarnation, see the chapter in *Incarnation and Myth, The Debate Continues*, Ed Michael Goulder, SCM 1979 p51
³² *The Splendour of the King*. Songs of Fellowship No 2065. Volume 4. Kingsway 2007.
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³⁴ The hymn 'And can it be'
³⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_excluded_middle
³⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/laws-of-thought#ref180926>
³⁷ For example Richard Foster, *Money, Sex and Power*: Hodder and Stoughton 2009
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⁴¹ *ibid.* p229/230
⁴² Youth for Christ www.yfc.org.uk
⁴³ Hope: www.hope-together.org.uk
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⁴⁶ Fowler. *op.cit.* p186
⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p 198
⁴⁸ Richter, Philip and Francis, Leslie J. *Gone but not forgotten*, DLT 1998
⁴⁹ Kinnaman *op.cit.*
⁵⁰ Aisthorpe, Andrew. *The Invisible Church*. St Andrews Press. 2016
⁵¹ e.g. Matthew 7:14
⁵² Luke 22:1-6
⁵³ Luke 22: 54-62
⁵⁴ Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:1-15
⁵⁵ Matthew 18:2-4
⁵⁶ I Corinthians 13:11
⁵⁷ *op.cit.* *The Mystery of Salvation* 1995

⁵⁸ *ibid.* p134

⁵⁹ Currin, Jim, *Paradox in the Gospel?* Grovebooks. 2006 p3,10,12.

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⁶¹ Currin, Jim. *The 360 Gospel of Jesus.* Grovebooks. 2011.

⁶² A phrase used by Dietrich Bonhoeffer: <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/cheap-grace>

⁶³ The word *blessed* which is used in each of the beatitudes is a very special word. It is the Greek word *makarios* ... godlike joy ... which has its secret within itself, that joy which is serene and untouchable, and self-contained, that joy which is completely independent of the chances and changes of life. The English word *happiness* gives its own case away. It contains the root *hap*, which means chance. Human happiness is something which is dependent on the chances and changes of life, something which life may give and which life may also destroy ... The beatitudes speak of that joy which seeks us through our pain .. quoted in Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew Vol 1.* St Andrew Press 2014 pp102/3

⁶⁴ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/theologians/karl-barth.html>

⁶⁵ *Let the earth hear his voice.* World Wide Publications 1975 p5

⁶⁶ Yates, Timothy. *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century* CUP 1996 p 219

⁶⁷ https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

⁶⁸ *MISSIO Anglicans in Mission* Ed Johnson, Eleanor, and Clark, John. SPCK 2000 p20

⁶⁹ c.f. 1Corinthians 12

⁷⁰ Ward, Peter. *Youthwork and the Mission of God.* SPCK 1997 p104

⁷¹ *Evangelii Gaudium:* 111-134.

⁷² John V Taylor, *Mission as Dialogue*, quoted in *Pray Every Day.* Ed Ronald Jasper. Collins 1976 p51 with 'man' changed to 'person' in the last sentence.

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