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The Crisis of Theological Historicism and How It May Be Overcome

William Mundle

Herbert J. Bouman (Translator)
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

**The Crisis of Theological Historicism and
How It May Be Overcome**

WILHELM MUNDLE

Bible Study in the Life of the Church

OSCAR E. FEUCHT

The Devotional Use of the Bible

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Homiletics

Theological Observer

Book Review

VOL. XXXIII

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The Crisis of Theological Historicism and How It May Be Overcome

By WILHELM MUNDLE

(This article appeared in Lutherischer Rundblick, August 1961, and is translated by Herbert J. A. Bouman of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo. The author, at present pastor in Boppard, Germany, was a member of the faculty of the University of Marburg where he taught New Testament Exegesis from 1919 to 1925.)

I

OUR theme, the crisis of theological historicism, is to be taken in a double sense. In the first place, I am thinking of the crisis which the historical approach has precipitated in theology and, in the second place, of the problems created by a consistent application of the historical method in historical research itself. As we shall see, both are related. To limit the theme, I shall confine myself to the questions connected with New Testament exegesis. However, a contest fought out in this arena will naturally have far-reaching consequences for the total understanding of theology.

Even in this limited area I shall not be able to exhaust the theme. I shall therefore concentrate on two foci where the crisis becomes particularly manifest: The doctrine concerning the Sacred Scriptures and Christology. Here the historical approach necessarily leads to understanding the New Testament texts as historic documents and Jesus as an historic person. Both have far-reaching implications for our total understanding of theology.

We shall have to say at the outset that if we acknowledge the validity of the historical approach, we shall not be able to

reject either the one or the other consequence. The writings of the New Testament came into being in space and time and reflect the historical place and situation of their origin. They can be read as historical documents just as well as they can be treated from philological and linguistic points of view. As little may we deny the genuine historicity of Jesus which is a full concomitant of His true humanity. Only we need to ask whether this says everything that should be said concerning the Sacred Scriptures and Jesus. A five-dollar bill is a piece of paper, the product of the paper industry. A child tearing it to pieces may regard it as nothing more. For the adult who uses the bill, however, it is something more, it is an object of value. Would not the same principle apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the New Testament texts and Jesus?

The problem becomes even more evident when we remember that the significance of Biblical exegesis for the training of theologians rests on a different evaluation of the Bible, namely, that the theologian is to be an expositor of the Word of God. This applies to both Protestant and Lutheran theology in a larger measure than, for example, to Roman Catholicism. When Luther said at the Leipzig Disputation that Pope and councils may err, he did not lessen but increased the abiding authority of the "Word of God," that is, the Bible. In the dogmatics of Lutheran Orthodoxy there is a strong emphasis on

the authority of Scripture in unequivocal terms. Nor is the situation changed by Luther's judgments in the prefaces to his Bible translation, to which Biblical criticism is accustomed to refer. The historicocritical method of Bible study was able to penetrate the Protestant churches only after overcoming considerable opposition.

How little Luther's thinking was governed by historical concerns is demonstrated by his estimate of St. John's Gospel as the "unique, tender chief gospel," a document whose value as an historical source is generally disparaged by historical research. Luther also valued the Pauline letters and 1 Peter more highly than the synoptic gospels, while the historicocritical Biblical research regards the latter as the most important "sources" of the history of Jesus, in spite of all reservations. We see here the far-reaching consequences of the historical approach for the evaluation of the New Testament writings as well as for the understanding of the New Testament view of Christ. According to the New Testament conception the earthly career of Jesus by no means embraces the whole of His Christhood. Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, who before His earthly existence was with the Father in divine glory. As the Risen One He is exalted at the right hand of God and is active in His church through Word and Sacrament. And the church looks forward to His return at the end of time, His coming to save and to judge. Of all these assertions of the faith the historical approach, which is directed solely to the earthly existence of Jesus, retains only the "historical Jesus." Now, whether we regret or welcome this development, we are com-

pelled to acknowledge the historical approach as a fact, and we must try somehow to come to grips with it.

The birth date of the "historical Jesus" may be established with considerable accuracy. It is the year 1778, when Lessing published the fragment of Samuel Hermann Reimarus, "Concerning the Purpose of Jesus and His Disciples." This was the last of the seven fragments which he selected from the "Apology or Defense on Behalf of the Reasonable Adorers of Christ." The second-last fragment treats the resurrection of Christ. Reimarus was the first to disrupt the connection between the "Christ of faith" and the "historical Jesus." He sketches the picture of a man who advanced the Messianic claim. Jesus wanted to establish an earthly Messianic kingdom; He did not go to Jerusalem for the purpose of suffering and dying. In Jerusalem catastrophe struck: God forsook Jesus! The death of Jesus puts an end to His earthly existence; there is no sequel. The disciples, no longer wishing to work, proclaimed Jesus' resurrection and imminent return to the world. This accent on the eschatological imminence connects Reimarus with Albert Schweitzer, who for that reason refers favorably in his history of the search for the historical Jesus to Reimarus, in spite of the latter's primitive conception.¹ It is clear already in the case of Reimarus that it is impossible to write such a life of Jesus without subjecting the gospels—all gospels—to criticism and correcting their presentation at decisive points. This is basically true of all historicocritical lives of Jesus.

¹ A. Schweitzer, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, 1913 (the first edition, 1906, had the title *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*), pp. 13 ff.

Albert Schweitzer has provided a history of the research into the life of Jesus to the turn of the 20th century in his well-known book, which dare, of course, not be read uncritically. The climax of the critical approach, in my opinion, was reached already in 1835 with the publication of D. F. Strauss's life of Jesus. This book already presents the decisive critical arguments. For Strauss the miracles of Jesus are "myths," or "legends," in the transmuted terminology of today. These myths must be put away. However, Strauss's criticism extends not only to the stories concerning Jesus but also to the tradition of the words of Jesus, especially the discourses in John's Gospel. Also the belief in Christ's resurrection is eliminated. The book stirred up a storm of protest and a spate of counter-attacks whereby the author's academic career was destroyed. Nevertheless, his work has had strong effects.

It is true, the later criticism dropped many of Strauss's radical views. Around 1900 many New Testament exegetes had come to the conviction that the historical Jesus as a human personality, with His purity, His faith in God the Father, and His loving attitude, might well replace the dogmatic portrait of Christ developed by earlier centuries. This optimistic view found classical expression in the famous but also much controverted lectures of Harnack on the "essence of Christianity" (1900). This book was preceded by his *History of Dogma*, in which Harnack supplemented his criticism of the New Testament with a presentation of the history of the church's dogma. The dogma of the ancient church came into being, he said, through the influence of the Greek spirit on Christianity; it is characterized as a

false development. Harnack's opponents, including his own father, Theodosius Harnack,² saw clearly that the rejection of the church's dogma was the presupposition for this view of history.

The turn of the century also marked the beginning of the crisis in the life-of-Jesus research, as characterized by three famous names, A. Schweitzer, W. Wrede, and R. Bultmann. In 1901 A. Schweitzer had published a sketch of the life of Jesus, the results of which are included in the 21st chapter of his *Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Comparing the book with Harnack's *Essence of Christianity*, we see at once that a new, strange picture of Jesus is presented here. The hope of the final consummation, which is only peripheral in Harnack's presentation, becomes central through Schweitzer's "consistent eschatology" and takes the form of an expectation of an imminent realization. Hopeful that the end is near (Matt. 10:23), Jesus went to Jerusalem in order to bring about the coming of the Messianic kingdom by means of His suffering and death. However, Jesus' expectation was not realized — note the parallel with the thought of Reimarus. Schweitzer's presentation is doubtless a construction of history which does violence to the texts. Yet the fact that the portrait of Jesus could be drawn in such a way signified a crisis for historical research. Especially is this true in view of the question whether the "historical Jesus," thus understood, can have any further significance for the Christian congregation's life of faith.

Of far greater significance than Schweit-

² Cf. the biography of Harnack by his daughter: A. von Zahn-Harnack, *Adolf von Harnack*, 2d ed. (1951), pp. 104 f.

zer's sketch of the life of Jesus was the deeply penetrating work of W. Wrede concerning the Messianic secret. It raised many questions for the life-of-Jesus research and opened up many-sided perspectives. First of all, Wrede shattered the confidence in Mark's Gospel and the so-called source of transmitted sayings as the oldest reliable tradition. According to Wrede, even this tradition already has a history behind it. Then Wrede shows how little the Gospel is interested in the questions posed by modern historical criticism. For example, the question about the origin of Jesus' Messianic consciousness lies beyond the purview not only of Mark's Gospel but of the entire gospel tradition. This tradition presupposes without reflection that the honorific titles which the Christian faith ascribes to Jesus are His rightfully and that Jesus lived and acted in accordance with His awareness of His divine mission. Wrede is particularly interested in those gospel accounts in which Jesus hides His Messianic authority and miracle working from the people. From this Wrede concludes that Mark proceeds from the premise that the real recognition of what Jesus is did not begin until His resurrection.

At this point we are confronted with the important question concerning the historical perspective. Wrede denies the resurrection of Jesus. This compels him to conclude that the Christian community has read its dogmatics back into the life of Jesus. Wrede regards the gospel account as unhistorical. But what is the situation if we view the historical phenomenon of Jesus from the perspective of the Pauline kenosis (Phil. 2:6 ff.)? In that case it is not at all necessary to negate

Wrede's conclusions in principle. It is entirely understandable and plausible that the disciples of Jesus only grasped the true significance of Jesus after Easter (cf. Rom. 1:4; Luke 24:13 ff.; John 16:12 ff.). From which point of view do we obtain the correct understanding of the history of Jesus?

The crisis in the life-of-Jesus research was heightened by R. Bultmann's *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, which appeared first in 1921 (4th edition, 1958). Influenced by Wrede, Bultmann seeks to shed light on the prehistory of the synoptic tradition. He employs the method of form criticism, that is, the analysis of the literary genres, which Gunkel had been the first to apply to the Old Testament. It must be admitted that the attempt to illumine the history also of the oral tradition leads to an area of much speculation and little certainty. It should be apparent that this approach easily leads to skepticism. Everywhere the acumen of the expositor discovers traditional materials, but it becomes increasingly more difficult to decide which traditions will bring us to the historical reality. Bultmann's "historical Jesus" remains barely tangible.

1921 also saw the appearance of the second edition of Barth's commentary on Romans. The aim of this highly controversial book was evidently to gain a new hearing for the divine message which Paul as "debtor to both Jew and Greek" (Rom. 1:14) desired to transmit to the Romans. Here Karl Barth speaks as protagonist of a theological movement which aimed at forsaking the rationalistic approach of theological historicism and returning to the objective bases of the Christian faith as contained in God's revelation. Curiously

enough, Bultmann, too, was in sympathy with Barth, although his *New Testament and Mythology* (1941) made it clear that he did not share Barth's basic position after all. Viewed as a whole, Barth's work did not destroy the dominance of the historicocritical method in exegesis. As a matter of fact, he later concentrated his interests, above all, on the dogmatic questions.

Yet Bultmann did adopt some motifs from Barth and also from Martin Kähler. The latter had launched the attack on the historicism of the life-of-Jesus research in his famous book in 1892, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historical, Biblical Christ* (2d ed., 1896). The real, Biblical Christ is to be found in the gospels, not by means of a construct of history which goes back behind the gospels and which attempts by a revision of the gospels to depict the "historical Jesus." Kähler turned emphatically against the mutilation of the Biblical witness to Christ, a mutilation which is practiced by reducing the Biblical witness to the historical Jesus. "We have converse with the Jesus of our gospels, because it is just there that we learn to know that Jesus whom our faith and our prayer find at the right hand of God" (2d ed., p.60). For Kähler the real Christ is not the historical Jesus *behind* the gospels, "but the Christ of the apostolic kerygma, yes, of the entire New Testament." (P.64)

Bultmann took up this thought of Kähler's; he, too, places the kerygmatic Christ, the Christ of the apostolic proclamation, in antithesis to the "historical Jesus." In this way there has come about the odd coupling of historical skepticism with the motives of an entirely different kind of theology

which plays so important a role in contemporary theological discussion. One is almost justified in speaking of a theological chaos. The stout collection of essays on *Der historische Jesus und der kerygmatische Christus*, published in 1960 by the Ev. Verlagsanstalt, Berlin, demonstrates how diversely these problems can be viewed and evaluated.

For the clarification of the difficulties involved here one would have to ask whether it is at all possible to look upon the kerygmatic Christ *as a reality* on the basis of Bultmann's presuppositions.³ For in his book *Neues Testament und Mythologie* he contends that the vicarious suffering of Christ, the resurrection, and the ascension of our Lord are not testimony concerning a real event, but are involved with the mythical cosmology of the New Testament. But what is left of the New Testament witness to Christ if the assertions of the Christian faith concerning the Lord's exaltation are rejected and the historical Jesus, as a result of the skeptical results of historical research, becomes problematical and unrecognizable?

To the objections which were raised understandably by Bultmann's "conservative colleagues" Bultmann gave the famous reply: "I often get the impression that my conservative colleagues in the New Testament feel quite uncomfortable, for I see them constantly occupied with rescue operations (*Rettungsarbeiten*). I calmly let the fire rage because I see that what is burning are the phantasies of the life-of-Jesus research, yes, the Christ *κατὰ σάφρα* Himself."⁴ We may well ask whether

³ That Kähler answers this question affirmatively is evident from the above-cited quotation.

Bultmann himself is not also engaged in "rescue operations" and whether his much-discussed existential interpretation of the kerygma is essentially different from the "rescue operations" of other theologians. But if rescue operations are necessary at all, it would seem to be advisable to begin before the house has burned down to the foundations.

But what is Bultmann's "existential interpretation" all about? In Bultmann's opinion the objectivized presentations of the mythos have become impossible for us. However, behind these New Testament conceptions there is an understanding of existence which is at least related to that of Heidegger's philosophy. Mythological language aims basically at nothing else than giving expression to "the significance of the historical event." The proclamation of the cross of Christ asks the hearer if he is willing to appropriate this significance and be crucified with Christ; the resurrection of Christ, interpreted existentially, is nothing else than faith in the cross as a saving event. The saving event is an historical happening in space and time; hence for Bultmann the kerygmatic Christ is fundamentally none other than the historical Jesus. The sense of the kerygma is the proclamation of the fate and person of Jesus in its soteriological significance, that is, in its significance for our contemporary understanding of existence.⁵

Two important objections must be raised

⁴ *Glauben und Verstehen* (1927), I, 101. The designation is derived from 2 Cor. 5:16. We cannot here discuss this difficult, variously interpreted passage.

⁵ "Neues Testament und Mythologie," *Kerygma und Mythos*, ed. H. W. Bartsch (1948), pp. 44, 47, 50, 52.

against this conception. In the first place, the existential interpretation represents a reinterpretation of the New Testament assertions of faith which does not do justice to their proper meaning. The authors of the New Testament were not modern existentialists. Also viewed historically, it is an anachronism to attempt an interpretation of the New Testament on the basis of Heidegger's existential philosophy. Is the principle underlying this exegesis very far removed from the allegorical exegesis of the church fathers who also approach the New Testament texts with questions with which they are not concerned? Secondly, we must ask whether it is possible to separate understanding of existence and understanding of reality. As is clear from his letters, the apostle Paul knows himself to be the witness and apostle called by the exalted Lord Himself. This existential understanding becomes invalid if the resurrection of Christ is made doubtful. "If Christ be not raised, we are found false witnesses of God" (1 Cor. 15:15). Just as little can Christians think of themselves as of people who have been redeemed and freed from their sins if the bodily resurrection of Christ is denied (15:17). The loss of Christ's resurrection brings with it the loss of the Christian's "understanding of existence." Therefore Bultmann's rescue attempt is bound to fail. How is an existential interpretation of the New Testament possible at all if the Christ, crucified, risen, and exalted to the right hand of God, is a "mythos," if the historical Jesus, "the Christ after the flesh," has been burned up, that is, has become well-nigh unrecognizable for us? Bultmann's pupils have sensed this and therefore attempt to give the kerygmatic Christ a new content by plac-

ing more emphasis on the positive significance of the "historical Jesus." This, however, has led to some rather curious approaches, as is evident from the book of the American James M. Robinson, *New Quest of the Historical Jesus*.⁶ Robinson assigns to exegesis the task of demonstrating the continuity of the "historical Jesus" with the apostolic kerygma by means of showing the congruence of both understandings of existence. It is obvious that this addresses questions to the New Testament texts with which these have nothing to do. We must try to find a different approach. We surely cannot ignore the fact that the Christ of the apostolic proclamation is not simply a figure of past history; He is "the same yesterday, today, and forever." (Heb. 13:8)

II

To find the way to correct answers to the questions raised, we shall first posit some general considerations which concern the relationship between the I and the world. Because of the naive, unconsidered stance we occupy we are inclined to equate the world in which we live with the *one* "objective" reality. It is easy to demonstrate, however, that this one, objective reality is experienced in a different way by each I-subject. When I deliver a speech, a lecture, or a sermon, I am in a situation

completely different from my hearers. Each hearer will try somehow to incorporate what he hears into his own reality, either positively or negatively. Or think of the fellowship of a family in which father, mother, sons, and daughters each occupy their own place, which is not transferable. Each member will experience the family fellowship in a different way. To each ego is assigned a different world which is experienced from a different focus.

Let us make the application to history. Past history, too, was experienced in a different way by the people involved. Americans, British, Germans, and Russians experienced the events of the First and the Second World War in a different way. Also our own view of the past undergoes a change as the perspective from which we see the event is altered. This applies also to the events reported by the Biblical documents. The chief priests, Pilate, and the disciples of Jesus experienced the Passion story in a different way; not only the Passion story but also the history of Jesus that preceded the Passion. And to the differing understanding of the events there will necessarily correspond a different picture of Jesus.

At this point we are compelled to ask: *From which presuppositions will we understand the history of Jesus correctly?* We are speaking of salvation history and saving event. The premise of these theological concepts is always a *believing* perception of history. May an historical science which is "objective," or is neutral, or even opposed to the Christian faith, make use of this concept at all? Not only the New Testament texts themselves but also the events which they report may be inter-

⁶ James M. Robinson, *New Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Studies in Biblical Theology, No. 25 (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1959). The German translation has the title *Kerygma und historischer Jesus* (Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1960). See my review in *Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenzeitung*, xv, 7 (1 April 1961), 116, cols. 2, 3; also the essay by Martin Lippold, "Die Wiederkehr der Frage nach dem historischen Jesus," *ibid.*, xv, 13 (1 July 1961), 205—208, including bibliography.

preted and have at all times been interpreted in a different way.

This insight has far-reaching implications for our understanding of history. Natural science today recognizes the principle that the observer cannot be isolated from the results of research. The same is true of historical knowledge. Different vantage points provide different pictures of past events. Every historical perspective, however, is one-sided and therefore limited. Without recognizing the relativity of historical knowledge it will not be possible to understand the questions which I raised in my book *Faith in Christ and Historical Skepticism* (1950). Sooner or later exegesis will be forced to deal with these questions.

How differently the event can be interpreted is clear from the mocking inscription which Pilate, as recorded in the gospels, placed on the cross. The mockery is underscored by the jeering high priests beneath the cross: "He saved others; Himself He cannot save" (Mark 15:31). "God has forsaken Him," said not only the high priests but also H. S. Reimarus. This is the portrait of the "historical Jesus" without Easter. How different is the interpretation of John the Baptist and of Christendom: "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Yet it is the same Jesus and the same event. The picture we get of this event is decisively determined by our understanding of it. Thus, in the last analysis, we are confronted with the question concerning the proper presuppositions for our understanding of salvation history.

The understanding of Easter cannot be separated from the Passion. But it is just the Easter event which appears to be

doubtful in the view of historicocritical research. Following the lead of David Friedrich Strauss, one can construct the events in such a way that the miracle of resurrection is eliminated. The Gospel accounts of the empty grave are understood as "legends" that were developed later; the appearances of the risen Lord, which are reported by Paul (1 Cor. 15:3 ff.), in addition to the gospels, are construed as "hallucinations," that is, products of the imagination of believing disciples. However—and this must be clearly noted—we are here dealing with a *reconstruction* of the event, a reconstruction which lacks the decisive element, namely, precise scientific documentation. In any case, the criticism inaugurated by Strauss has created a great deal of uncertainty regarding the real content of the Easter event. But however problematical this question seems to be in the view of the modern critical approach, it is unproblematical in the view of the New Testament. The New Testament authors were not concerned with the critical question concerning the way the Easter event happened, a question to which the church historian Von Campenhausen recently devoted a special study.⁷ We do not observe in the New Testament writers an attempt to fix precisely the details of the event and preserve them for remembrance. Beyond argument, however, for both Paul and the evangelists is the great *deed of God* in the resurrection of Christ. For all New Testament authors it is also self-evident that the risen Lord is the Originator of the Easter event.

⁷ Hans Frhr. von Campenhausen, *Der Ablauf der Osterereignisse und das leere Grab*, Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. Klasse, 2d ed. (1958).

Both the accounts of the empty grave and the appearances of the Risen One are to be understood only from this presupposition. The question concerning the continuity of the New Testament proclamation of salvation is also given a simple answer from this point of view. The New Testament regards the earthly Christ and the risen Christ as identical. Since the apostles—including Paul, according to his self-estimate—are the witnesses of Christ, called and empowered by the exalted Lord, it is inconceivable for New Testament authors that there should be a difference in content between the message of the "historical Jesus" and the witness of His apostles.

The question concerning the resurrection of Christ is not purely historical but ontological, that is, ultimately theological. It concerns the reality of the risen Lord. Not the understanding of existence, but the understanding of reality in the New Testament must be our starting point. If the risen Christ, in whom Christians believe, is a phantom, sprung from the illusionary fantasies of the disciples, then this Christ cannot be the Object of our faith, our hope, our love, and our prayers. Then also there can be no continuity between the pre-Easter message of Jesus and the apostolic message concerning the crucified and risen Lord. Hence for the apostles, as is evident from 1 Cor. 15, the affirmation of Christ's resurrection is the article by which the church of Christ stands and falls.

Here, too, we see again that the *establishment* of facts and the *interpretation* of facts are inseparable. The use of Biblical criticism to the risen Christ is not an historical position, but a meta-historical one, even where it confronts us in the

form of an historical judgment. The question whether or not the risen Lord stands behind the event of Easter cannot be decided through historical research. Easter faith is by no means concerned only with the evaluation of a past event; this faith embraces both present and future (John 14:19). The Christian who stands on this faith has through it a direct access to the *living* Lord.

Only faith in the Easter event can give us the proper understanding of the historical appearance of Jesus. Believing Christians have always followed this course. All gospels climax their account of the earthly career of Jesus with His saving death and His resurrection. Therefore, in spite of all individual differences, their structures are similar. Since Jesus spoke His words but did not write them, we do not have any *ipsissima verba* of the "historical Jesus." Except for a few scattered words of the Lord, the Word of Jesus has come to us in the gospel tradition, that is, in the witness of the believing community of disciples. Since the apostolic kerygma has given form to the gospel tradition, also the historicocritical study of Scripture cannot go behind the apostolic kerygma. This method may indeed put critical questions to the gospel tradition, but if it wants to go behind the gospels and correct their presentation, it has no other means of knowledge than historical imagination. The situation is no different today from what it was in the days of H. S. Reimarus. Since the creations of this imagination cancel each other, the life-of-Jesus research always ends in historical skepticism. If we are not permitted to gain an understanding of the historical appearance of Jesus from the apostolic kerygma, we must finally arrive at the conclusion that exegesis must

do without any assured "scientific" understanding of the person of Jesus.

Hence it is also impossible to see faith in Jesus as an encounter with the historical Jesus. It can, of course, not be denied that the historian who steepes himself in the past may have "an encounter" with the figures of the past. The research historian may put himself to such an extent into the place of Paul, Augustine, Luther, and also Goethe and Kant, that his thinking will be decisively influenced by them. In this way the great dead of history may become our teachers through the heritage of the mind which they have preserved for us. Who would not be grateful for the possibilities opened up here? Is not such an encounter possible also with the "historical Jesus"? If it is possible, it could be mediated to us only through the witness of the community of believing disciples as found in the gospels. It is certainly also conditioned by the evaluation of this witness, that is, through our faith in Jesus. And surely the modern historical-critical method of Bible study does nothing to help such an "encounter" with Jesus, because this method makes highly doubtful which parts of the tradition may be used in behalf of the "historical Jesus." In any case we must conclude: An encounter with an historical personage of the past is quite different from the faith in Jesus which the apostolic kerygma demands of us. Understood purely as an historical phenomenon, Jesus belongs to the past and can be the object of our faith as little as Paul, Luther, Goethe, or other historical figures. Faith in Christ presupposes the certainty that Jesus lives and is exalted at the right hand of God. This certainly is inconceivable apart from Easter, as surely as this faith has been prepared by the

earthly career of Jesus. But without the revelation of the risen Lord the faith of the disciples would not have weathered the crisis which the death of Jesus meant for them. Nor can the fact be overlooked that the authority of the Jesus of history is based on the authority of the apostolic kerygma and becomes doubtful if the validity of this message is questioned.

On the other hand, the Christian whom the living Lord confronts in the apostolic witness does not at all need an encounter with the Jesus of history, even though he will not disparage the gospels and their witness to the earthly existence of Jesus. We cannot now unfold the wealth of apostolic witness to the saving activity of the living Christ.⁸ This witness gives the Christian who accepts it in faith so rich a spiritual treasure that the discussions of the exegetes regarding the credibility of the gospel tradition no longer touch him in the innermost center of his faith. The critical doubts cannot prevent the Christian from apprehending by faith the Lord whom the apostolic Gospel proclaims to him.

At this point the connection between the Scripture principle and the New Testament message concerning Christ becomes evident. According to the apostolic Christ witness, as seen in 1 Cor. 15:3 ff. and many other Pauline statements,⁹ the apostolic Gospel, with the crucified and risen Lord as its content, was proclaimed as a divine, not a human message. In this witness Christ speaks to us as the *living* Lord.

⁸ Cf. my book *Der Glaube an Christus und der historische Zweifel*, pp. 24 ff.

⁹ Cf., in addition to Von Campenhausen, pp. 93 ff., my essay "Die Autorität des apostolischen Evangeliums," *Ev.-Luth. Kirchenzeitung*, XIV, 17 (Sept. 1, 1960), 259—263.

"The Word is nigh thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart" (Rom. 10:8). This word demands the obedience of faith from the Christians. "So we preach, and so ye believed," Paul writes to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:11). The apostolic preaching is the basis for the Christian faith (Rom. 10:17). Is it *permissible* to go behind this witness? In his discussion with Bultmann, Paul Althaus has turned against the prohibition of an historical inquiry behind the kerygma.¹⁰ But Bultmann's critical objection is justified: "The word of proclamation meets us as the Word of God, the legitimacy of which we may not question!"¹¹ However, the question may not remain unanswered as to the basis for the authority of the Word of God. The apostolic witness gives the answer: The apostle Paul did not receive his Gospel from man; it rests on the revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:11 f.). From this premise—and only here—are we justified in waiving historical inquiry. Where such inquiry is demanded the apostolic authority is already questioned, since it is not regarded as sufficient. Is it possible at all to furnish *historical* proof that the authority of the living Christ stands behind the apostolic Gospel? The divine revelation discloses itself only to *faith*. On what shall this faith rest if not on the *Word of God*? *But if the apostolic kerygma is acknowledged as a divine message, then also the identity of the historical and risen Christ is acknowledged, as well as the continuity of proclamation, based on this identity,*

and the fact of the resurrection. For us there is no other approach to Jesus Christ than the message which proclaims Him. Ultimately, however, the content of this message is not an event, but the Lord who has attested Himself in this message and continues to manifest Himself as the living Lord to His own. Without the living Lord there is neither a "Christ event" nor a "redemption history."

But such faith—this must be made clear in conclusion—is not a new understanding of existence but rather the surrender of one's own existence to the reality of the living Lord. This may be seen from the confession which Paul made to the Philippians in describing his conversion (Phil. 3:4 ff.). Formerly he had been a strict Jew, proud of all the privileges of his people, circumcision, tribal relationship, Pharisaic devotion to the Law, the zeal which made him a persecutor of the church. But he surrendered this existence of his as a pious Israelite, yielded it for the sake of the Greater, for the sake of Christ. For the sake of the excellency of the knowledge of Christ he counted all these things loss and dung. He gives up his existence as a believing Israelite and the righteousness based on that existence, just as later Martin Luther gave up his monastic righteousness. Paul does this in order to receive the righteousness which is through faith, that is, from Christ. By faith he is found "in Christ" (Phil. 3:9), and in Christ he receives the new existence (2 Cor. 5:17). Just like faith and the righteousness of faith, this new being is constituted in the reality of Christ. Without the *solus Christus* the *sola fide* is inconceivable. In this *derived* sense, of course, faith also brings with it a new *understanding* of existence. The apostle

¹⁰ P. Althaus, "Das sogenannte Kerygma und der historische Jesus" (1958), included in revised form in the symposium *Der historische Jesus und der kerygmatische Christus* (1960), pp. 236 ff.

¹¹ *Neues Testament und Mythologie*, p. 50.

sees himself as a slave, a prisoner of Christ—but also as His apostle, His authorized messenger. In the gospels the relationship of Christ to His disciples is no different. Think, for example, of the scene in Mark 1:16 f., where Jesus calls the disciples away from their fishing, places them into His service, and makes them “fishers of men.” A “fisher of men” can only be a man who himself has been captured by Christ. Here again the problematics of the historical research of Jesus become evident: May a Christian, a disciple acknowledging Jesus as his Lord, adopt toward Him the kind of neutral, “objective” attitude which an observing historian tries to adopt toward the object of his study?

The Christ of the apostolic proclamation can be grasped only by faith. He is identical with the Jesus of history, but in the servant form of His human historical appearance His divine glory is visible only to faith. The Pauline *kenosis* (Phil. 2:6) makes this clear; it is a more objective category of theological interpretation than the “mythos of history” of the historical Jesus. Theology has no reason to reject the historical approach in principle; the Christian faith can also bear the fact that we know relatively little of the historical appearance of Jesus, and this judgment applies even though one does not approve of a basic historical skepticism. The fragmentary character of the gospel tradition, which gives the historical doubt so much leeway, is part of the “servant form” of the earthly Jesus. The Christian faith must, however, object to an absolutizing of historical thinking. This is a contradiction also from the philosophical point of view, for the historian is historically just as limited as the objects of his research.

A thoroughgoing restudy is necessary here. G. Stammer published an essay in the periodical *Kerygma und Dogma* (1960), pp. 233 ff., concerning the *metanoia* of the scholar. He shows that the scientific consciousness of the 19th-century scholar could quite generally be expressed in the formula “One must be scientific, *sicut deus non esset*” (p. 260). Is not this true also of the life-of-Jesus research in the 19th and 20th centuries, largely even of New Testament exegesis in our day?¹² Does this not make doubtful all the presuppositions that have created the church of Christ? At the very least, research should understand that to a science operating with rational methods only the rational side of reality is accessible and that from such premises there can be no *theological* thinking. Also Luther’s Small Catechism declares, “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him.” The history of the life-of-Jesus research confirms this. But the Christian who with the apostle sees himself as a prisoner of Christ has still another approach to Christ than the methodology of modern historical thinking: he has the obedience of faith which also takes reason captive under the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). The unsearchable riches of Christ, which the apostles proclaimed to the world, will disclose themselves only to a theologian who has the courage for such obedience.

¹² Cf. Bultmann, “Wie ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?” *Theol. Zeitschrift* (June 1957), p. 412: “The closed character of the entire historical sequence signifies that the connection of the historical event cannot be disrupted by the intervention of supernatural, otherworldly powers and that therefore there are no ‘miracles’ in this sense.”