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# The Hermeneutical Dilemma: Dualism in the Interpretation of Holy Scripture

MARTIN H. FRANZMANN

## INTRODUCTION

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod ought to have a special interest in hermeneutical questions. It is surely a great gift of God to our church that the authority of Scripture is for us still an unquestioned authority, that in all theological discussion in our midst it can be assumed that all participants are the "humble readers" of whom Luther speaks, that each man "trembles at the speech of God and continually cries, 'Teach me! Teach me!'" Of all church bodies we perhaps are, by the grace of God, the least corroded by the "acids of modernity," the most "naive" in our holy fear of Scripture. We need not apologize for this naivete; Jesus' promise to the child holds for the interpreter of Scripture also; he who receives the word of the kingdom "as a child" shall inherit the kingdom. And let us pray God that we never lose our sense of trembling awe at His Word. But it is part of our responsible stewardship of these gifts that we do not let this naivete lead us to oversimplify the hermeneutical problem and do not let our holy fear degenerate into an all-too-human panic fear which refuses to face genuine hermeneutical problems.

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(EDITORIAL NOTE: This essay was originally delivered before a conference of Lutheran pastors in Porto Alegre, Brazil. It was subsequently presented to the St. Louis Pastoral Conference of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.)

Hermeneutics has a long history, and in our times the hermeneutical debate, or discussion, is exceedingly voluminous, varied, and (as yet) inconclusive. It is characteristic and significant that within the last years very few comprehensive treatments of hermeneutics have appeared. Of those which have appeared, Kurt Frör's<sup>1</sup> would seem to provide the best basis for a hermeneutical discussion in our church today. It shows a broad and deep acquaintance with the current hermeneutical literature and discussion. Theologically, it occupies a middle-of-the-road position; it is not so far removed from our own concerns as conservative Lutherans as the *Hermeneutik* of E. Fuchs,<sup>2</sup> for example. And, above all, it is practical in aim; this brings it near to us who view theology not, first and foremost, as a scholarly discipline, a *Wissenschaft*, but as a *habitus practicus*. The subtitle of the book indicates that it speaks to our concerns: *Zur Schriftauslegung in Predigt und Unterricht* ("The Interpretation of Scripture in Preaching and Instruction"). In the foreword Frör quotes with approval G. Ebeling's dictum that the hermeneutical problem experiences its "ultimate concentration" in the act of preaching (p. 5) and goes on to say that "the consideration of hermeneutical problems

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<sup>1</sup> Kurt Frör, *Biblische Hermeneutik* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Fuchs, *Hermeneutik* (Bad Cannstatt: R. Müllerschön Verlag, 1954).

must be carried through to the point where the hearer is actually confronted, in preaching, in catechetical instruction, and in Biblical instruction. This confrontation, or encounter, occurs in its primary form, and in a way that sets the example for all other encounters, in the assembled congregation which is listening to the Word of the risen Christ and calls upon Him as the present and returning Lord of the church. Theological hermeneutics cannot ignore this given, basic situation of the interpretation of Scripture at any point in its theoretical thinking or at any stage of its practical application" (p. 5).<sup>3</sup> Whether we agree or disagree with his hermeneutical thinking and the hermeneutical principles which result from that thinking, Frör is asking *our* hermeneutical question; and a conversation with him promises to be a profitable one.

Where shall the conversation begin? After an introductory chapter, in which he expands on the idea expressed in his foreword that the primary and proper *Sitz im Leben* of Biblical interpretation is the assembled church (pp. 11-19), Frör goes on to give a sketch of the history of Biblical interpretation (pp. 20-46). Then in the third chapter he discusses eight basic questions of Biblical hermeneutics: (1) The Historical Method; (2) The Question of Presuppositionless Exegesis; (3) *Vorverständnis* ("Pre-understanding"); (4) The Hermeneutical Circle; (5) Dualism in Biblical Interpretation; (6) Interpretation as an Understanding Encounter with the Text; (7) The Canon as Context; (8) Lending an Ear to the History of Interpretation. It is noteworthy that of

these eight basic questions, two deal with the question of *history* and interpretation, namely the first (The Historical Method) and the fifth (Dualism in Biblical Interpretation); and the problem of history occupies a correspondingly prominent place in all the subsequent sections of Frör's work. We shall therefore concentrate on this question in this essay.

#### I. THE PROBLEM OF HISTORICISM

As his sketch of the history of Biblical interpretation under the influence of historical criticism shows (pp. 26-31), Frör is well aware of the false assumptions which underlay the historical criticism of the 18th and 19th centuries, of its inherent dogmatism, and of its negative effects theologically. He is aware, too, that 19th-century historicism has left a legacy of unsolved problems, despite the fact that the climate of historiography has changed considerably. He assents to G. Ebeling's judgment that "it would be a self-deception to maintain that this crisis occasioned by historicism has been overcome"; and he sees in the post-Liberal work of K. Barth, R. Bultmann, and the post-Bultmannians the continuation of the attempt to meet the questions raised by the development of our modern historical consciousness.

And yet Frör's attitude toward the historical method as such is strongly positive (pp. 48, 49). For one thing, he says, we have no choice; as 20th-century men we must employ the historical method in the interpretation of the Biblical books. He concedes that not everyone need read his Bible in this way, to be sure; but he contends that those entrusted with the responsible public proclamation of the Word simply cannot ignore the historical study

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also Frör's first chapter, "Was heisst theologische Schriftauslegung?" pp. 11-19.

of the Word: "The historical method is indissolubly connected with the conception of history which has grown up, or developed, in the last three centuries. We cannot escape from thinking historically (*in geschichtlichen Zusammenhängen*) even if we wanted to. Once the historical method has been developed, it constitutes a valid methodology (*Erkenntnisweg*), whose results one cannot deny without sacrificing one's integrity." (P. 48)

The employment of the historical method is, according to Frör, inevitable. It is also, he says, sound and useful. Although it is different from the hermeneutics of the Reformation, it carries forward the intention of the Reformation's emphasis on the *sensus literalis sive historicus*. "The historical method today is inquiring into this literal and historical sense of the texts. Only it employs, in doing so, the techniques of a fully-developed science of history (*Geschichtswissenschaft*). For us in our place in the history of culture this method is the most reliable means that we have of protecting the texts against arbitrary misinterpretation and so hearing them as the Reformation willed to hear them" (pp. 48, 49). The Biblical texts are records of God's creative activity in history; these acts are, as historical occurrences (*in ihrer Vorfindlichkeit*), completely human and earthly history, not discernible as God's acts by any external criterion. They are therefore legitimate objects of critical historical investigation, which seeks to determine "what really happened." The historical method is to be applied, not reluctantly and with reservations but freely. We are "to recognize its eminently positive significance for the task

of interpretation and to use it rightly." (P. 49)

"To use it rightly"—that is just the problem. Frör recognizes the problem and turns to it in the section which he calls "The Dualism of Biblical Interpretation" (pp. 56—60). The "dualism" referred to lies in the cleavage between the historical understanding of the text and a genuinely theological, or religious, understanding and appropriation of it. "Where exegesis takes over the methods of general scientific history and treats the Biblical texts as historical documents, it would seem that interpretation must inevitably and on principle become a two-level operation. We encounter this two-level mode of operation where interpreters first work in a 'purely historical' way and then attempt to get beyond a purely historical approach by way of a second [theological] investigation of the texts" (p. 56). Frör rejects the past attempts at "pneumatic exegesis" or "supra historical" exegesis, but he concedes that "they point clearly to a not-yet-resolved difficulty created by the historical-critical" methodology (p. 57). Neither does the existential exegesis of Bultmann, in his opinion, succeed in overcoming the dualism created by the historical-critical approach with its positivist assumptions.

Frör's own solution to the problem begins with a recognition of the fact that in the question of scientific (*wissenschaftlich*) knowing and understanding there is a noteworthy consensus to the effect "that the methods of historical-critical investigation are indispensable. Only, these methods now have a different place in the scale of values than in the days of positivism" (p. 58). That is, in the present-day understanding of history the

observation of the phenomena of a historical tradition is not separated, as a distinct operation, from the existential, sympathetic encounter with the tradition; rather, the two operations take place together. Frör quotes O. F. Bollnow with approval: "There is here no Before and After at all, but only a concurrence (*Miteinander*) in the concrete process of appreciative understanding" (p. 59). Applied to the interpretation of Scripture, this means: "One cannot first explain the whole [Biblical] event in terms of cause and effect within history and on the basis of universal analogy and then, after this task is finished, raise the question concerning the creative working of God in history. In this two-level procedure the results would get in each other's way or cancel each other out" (p. 59). For Frör the dualism in Biblical interpretation can be overcome only when the historical-critical work is taken up into the whole of the hermeneutical process: "The question of the historical sense of a text cannot be isolated from the total context of Scripture or from the hearing and confessing church's understanding of Scripture." (P. 60)

Frör has stated the problem well. A strict separation between historical-critical interpretation on the one hand and a purely theological interpretation on the other does result in a two-level, or two-stage, operation whose results are bound to be out of harmony with each other or can coexist in one mind and heart only in a sort of schizophrenic tension. For example, the Paul of the Epistle to the Galatians viewed in a "purely historical" way would be quite a different figure from Paul viewed as *Saint* Paul, from a religious,

theological, specifically Christian point of view. The objective historian (even if he attempts to be a sympathetic observer) might well conclude that this brilliant first-century religious genius, who had been somehow converted from strict Pharisaic Judaism to Christianity, is (for all his genuinely religious fervor, his consuming missionary zeal, and his burning love for his converts) an unbalanced character, a highly subjective man, incapable of a balanced and ecumenical view of religious differences, overwrought, an unfair controversialist with no feeling for the justified concerns of his opponents, not above employing forced and unconvincing rabbinical exegesis in order to make his polemical point, undisciplined in his invective, brutal in his anathema. The objective historian is bound to consider all the evidence, and he will give due weight to the opinion of Paul's opponents as it is reflected in the letter. Since Paul, and not his opponents, has left the record, the historian will probably in fairness be inclined to allow them at least equal weight with Paul's self-attestation. Thus the dilemma of dualism arises: Is there any road that leads from this historical figure to the "apostle, not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father," the apostle in whom Christ speaks, whose word is the Word of God?

Frör's solution of this problem of dualism is a movement in the right direction, certainly, and is good as far as it goes. But as one surveys his work, one is justified in asking whether he has faced the question involved fully and whether his answer is radical enough to be a real answer. Has he sufficiently indicated just how the historical-critical process operates? Has he really

succeeded in bringing the "historical sense" to its proper place within the total context of Scripture and into a harmonious relationship with the hearing and confessing church's understanding of Scripture?

Frör's conception of how the historical-critical work is to be "taken up into" the whole of the [theological] hermeneutical process is well illustrated by his discussion of saga and legend in the Biblical accounts (p. 81):

It is a law of history that saga and legend seize upon events and figures which are the objects of special veneration. The tradition seeks to make manifest the working of divine powers and to verify, or attest, their gracious effects. Therefore the tradition is necessarily subject to the process (*Gesetz*) of heightening (*Überhöhung*), enhancement, and proliferation. This again calls into play a process of sifting and of cutting back the proliferations. But only historical criticism goes methodically about the task of laying bare the "historical kernel" hidden in the tradition. This procedure, however, constitutes the final and latest phase of the history of tradition. The Biblical traditions, too, are subject to this regular and recurrent process. That is a part of their humanity and historicity, and only a dreadful positivistic misunderstanding of the "credibility" of the Bible finds it necessary to deny this on grounds of faith. It would be highly unnatural if just those events which underlie the Biblical tradition had not given rise to this process of adornment and enhancement. It is a part of the earthly humanity of Jesus that legendary narratives could twine themselves about His figure too, narratives designed to exalt and praise Him with the means which the believing church had at its disposal.

Before entering into a discussion of

what such a statement involves theologically, it will be well to illustrate how this principle works itself out in practice. Frör's treatment of the interpretation of the Infancy Narratives is a good example (pp. 278—286). It is what one would expect if the "law of history" stated by Frör (p. 81) is to be consistently applied. He sees, correctly enough, that these stories of Jesus' infancy and childhood are dominated by two motifs, the fulfillment of the Old Testament expectation and the fact that these stories, too, are part of the post-Easter proclamation of the crucified, risen, and exalted Lord of all creation. "In the light of the outspokenly eschatological intention of this proclamation one must understand the 'historization of the unhistorical' that is peculiar to these narratives; the eschatological Credo of the church has actively shaped and expanded the tradition and has imposed legendary features upon it" (p. 279). If the "law of history" (that venerated persons and events are subject to legendary exposition) holds for all venerated persons and events, this would be the way to consider and evaluate the Infancy Narrative. Frör quotes with approval (p. 282) a dictum of Käsemann's which extends this evaluation to the whole of Matthew's Gospel: "The whole history (*Historie*) of Jesus offered by the First Evangelist is not only seen from the vantage point of eschatology; it has also been shaped by it. This fact made it possible that the actual history (*Geschichte*) of Jesus was intertwined with traditional materials which must be designated as in themselves unhistorical, legendary, mythical." Frör concedes, it should be noted, that the author of the gospel himself considered these traditions to be historical

(p. 282). The "law of history" leads him to interpret *against* the intention of the evangelist.

An even more sweeping effect of the operation of a "law of history" is seen in Frör's section on *Überlieferungsgeschichte und Vergegenwärtigung* (pp. 243—253). The New Testament documents, he says, have behind them a long and complicated history of tradition, and it is only by tracing this history of the tradition and by reconstructing the unique and unrepeatable situation of the church in which a particular text (or an earlier element of it) was first produced that the preacher is able to proclaim it in a relevant way to the church today. In other words, form-critical, history-of-tradition, and history-of-redaction investigation, or study, of a text is indispensable if one is to preach it properly today (p. 243). Now the "law" that is operative in every stratum of the process of tradition can be formulated as follows: "Actualization — reinterpretation — variation" (p. 245). That is, whenever a word of Jesus or a parable or a miracle was proclaimed to the early church, it was reinterpreted in the light of current needs or problems and changed or reshaped to meet those needs. Indeed, the process of actualization went so far that words of Christian prophets were actually ascribed to the historical Jesus. (P. 245)

The task of the preacher necessarily includes *Sachkritik*, criticism of the substance of the New Testament message as it lies before us in written form. For, according to the historical study of the New Testament, these variations in the actualization of the tradition do not merely complement one another; they contradict one another. The exegete-preacher must then

determine, on the basis of the total context of the New Testament canon, "whether a proclamation made for this or that concrete situation has really adequately met its obligation, or whether this proclamation has disfigured, distorted, abridged, or weakened" [the substance of the tradition] (p. 251). This makes the task of the preacher more difficult, to be sure; he no longer has to do merely with a certain text but also with its history. But it also has a "liberating" effect on the preacher; for now the text no longer binds him in a "legalistic" way, and the preacher has the same "freedom for variation" which the author of the text claimed for himself. (P. 253)

Frör warns of the dangers that beset the preacher and urges the preacher to submit to the "discipline of the Spirit" as he exercises this "charismatic" freedom; "the freedom for variation," he says, can "be fruitful only when it is exercised in obedience, self-discipline, and responsibility" (p. 253). And Frör often gives evidence in his book that he is minded to obey his own admonitions. His treatment of the miracles of Jesus, for example (pp. 318—331), makes no concessions to the "modern mind," contains profound theological insights, and gives sound warnings and suggestions for the preacher. Here the "law of legend-making" receives scant attention. (Pp. 319, 329)

Frör is relatively conservative in the application of his historical-critical principles. But there is really no reason why he should be; a principle, or a method, is not to be applied "conservatively" or "radically"—it should simply be applied *consistently*. Therefore the more "radical" practitioners of the method can always re-

proach the more "conservative" ones with inconsistency. It is therefore not unfair to cite examples of a more "radical" use of the method in order to illustrate its tendency and its consequences.

Thus Ernst Lohmeyer, in his commentary on the Healing of the Paralytic (Mark 2:1-12),<sup>4</sup> employs a methodology very similar to that recommended by Frör and is led to deny that the central section (Jesus' pronouncement of forgiveness and His dispute with the scribes, vv. 5-10) is a part of the original tradition, and he goes on to deny the historicity of the incident itself: the early church has put into the mouth of Jesus those words which mark His presence on earth as the presence of the God

Who forgives all your iniquity,  
And heals all your diseases. (Ps. 103:3)

We become aware of the full impact of the historical-critical methodology when we see its massed result in the article "Jesus Christ" by F. C. Grant in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*.<sup>5</sup> To cite a few examples: Grant is of the opinion that the Infancy Narrative of Matt. 1 to 2 "is far less inspiring than Luke's; it resembles the fanciful but pedantic tales in the later Jewish midrash, which as a rule started with a text, or texts, and then 'recreated the scene' by a free flight of fancy, often fabricating historical events to meet the needs of the exegete or preacher. . . . The verse in Is. 7:14 . . . is now interpreted as a prediction of Jesus' birth, al-

though no suggestion of the idea (the Virgin Birth) is found anywhere else in the New Testament." (P. 880)

Concerning the temptation of Christ, Grant says: "In form, it is perhaps a meditation on the Deuteronomic story of the nation . . . rather than an autobiographical narrative from Jesus' own lips. Once more it is clear that the sources of the gospels included the Old Testament, which was viewed as of equal authenticity and authority for the life of Jesus with the church's own traditions. . . . The temptation narrative gives us an insight into a widespread early Christian view of Jesus, his nature, mission, and achievement" (p. 881). Later on Grant nevertheless stresses the fact that "the temptation narrative [is so true] to the whole character of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels that it provides the key to the beginning of His ministry." (P. 891)

Jesus' beatitude upon the confessing Peter at Caesarea Philippi is treated thus: "The blessing of Peter in Matt. 16:17-19, which implies a fully 'messianic' consciousness and purpose on Jesus' part, is now widely recognized to be a bit of pious theorizing or fancy in the interest of the supreme authority of Peter as the Christian interpreter of the law and the expounder of Christian duty. . . . The early Palestinian or Antiochene church, where Peter might have become the first pope, had Rome not claimed him." (P. 892)

According to Grant, the Jesus of the Synoptics "does not make Himself the center of His teaching or demand submission or loyalty to Himself as a condition of acceptance or admission to the kingdom of God. (The sayings that deal with loy-

<sup>4</sup> Ernst F. Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Markus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1937), pp. 50, 54.

<sup>5</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), II, 869—896.



alty in persecution even to the point of death obviously reflect the conditions of the early church, faced with the threat of extermination by either the Jewish synagogue or the Roman state or by both" (p. 892). Accordingly a great Christological utterance like Matt. 11:25-27 most likely had its "origin in early Christian devotion and meditation, like much of the material (also poetic) in the discourses of the Fourth Gospel." (P. 892)

Grant classifies the Jesus of history as a prophet (p. 893), but he does not seem to credit Jesus with even a prophet's insight into the future: "The view that the Gospel must first be preached to all nations (Mark 13:10; 14:9) and then will come the end (Matt. 24:14), is surely a later one. Contrast the idea set forth in 1 Cor. 15:24, which does not emphasize preaching." (P. 885)

Concerning Jesus' words to the Twelve in Matt. 10:5 (His command that they should not go to the Samaritans or to the Gentiles) Grant states that this is "now generally thought to reflect the views of ultra-right-wing Jewish Christians . . . rather than Jesus' own principles" (p. 885). The story of the Cursing of the Fig Tree, in Matthew's account of it, "becomes a lesson in successful cursing!" and "this picture of a disappointed, resentful, and vindictive prophet or holy man is not worthy of Jesus, and conflicts with the usual representation of Him in the Gospels" (p. 890). Jesus' predictions of His Passion "are projected backward into the Galilean ministry by Mark, presumably in order to show that Jesus was not taken unawares in Jerusalem and that He knew in advance what He was doing" (p. 892). As for Jesus' going of set purpose up to Jeru-

salem, resolved to give His life a ransom for many, Grant concedes that Jesus knew that He was running a great risk, "but that He actually courted death, or went up to Jerusalem knowing that He was to die, seems suicidal and—as a part of the Gospel story—unreal" (p. 893). The fact that Jesus' cry upon the cross is the opening words of Ps. 22 is viewed by Grant as further evidence that for the early Christians "the Old Testament . . . was exactly as reliable and authentic a source as their own local tradition or the earliest written accounts of the Passion." (P. 895)

Grant voices no concern over the results of this drastic historical criticism. He is of the opinion that "modern historical research is approaching a reliable consensus" concerning the historical Jesus and that this historical reconstruction is a great gain for faith: "We are confronted, as never before, by a consistent and homogeneous figure whose voice rings across the centuries and still penetrates our inmost hearts. And we hear this voice the clearer for the removal of secondary and really obstructing sounds, whether they be the voices of devout and consecrated disciples proclaiming their Lord, or the echoes of later theological discussion and debate" (p. 877). The work done by historical-critical investigation has also been a great gain for exegesis; the rise of the modern historical-critical view of the Bible has resulted in "the liberation of exegesis and literary-historical criticism from the shackles of dogmatic theology, though the process is not yet complete" (p. 877). Grant goes on to say, and these words are significant: "The consequences, for theology generally, have also been advantageous, for it has been compelled to find its data in

the immediate deliverances of religious faith, in general religious experience, and to rest its foundations upon a pure spiritual, self-consistent, self-authenticating view of religion—as may be seen in such modern theological systems as those of Paul Tillich and William Temple." (P. 877)

What has been said thus far is, of course, anything but a comprehensive survey of the principles and the workings of the historical method. But enough has been said concerning its basic bent to enable us to assess the method and the claims made for it, at least in a preliminary and tentative way. One might begin by criticizing it on its own terms, as a methodology, without for the first questioning its assumptions. Is the "law" of legend-making, for instance, derived from observation of the *Biblical* texts themselves, or is it imported into the Biblical domain from elsewhere? Where we are in a position to observe legend-making at work, we find that the writers of the New Testament are harshly intolerant of legend-making. The docetic Christology introduced into the congregations of Asia Minor (by Cerinthus?) is a kind of legendary embellishment of the history of Jesus of Nazareth; the First Letter of John opposes this legend-making by reasserting the original and basic Gospel fact of Jesus as the Christ who has come visibly, audibly, palpably in the flesh, and by branding the "legend" as the product of the spirit of the Antichrist. The climate of the early church does not seem to have been favorable to the rank growth of legends.

What about the "law" of the recurrent actualization — reinterpretation — variation of the proclamation of the Gospel? One is startled at the assurance with which

scholars make distinctions and judgments concerning the various "strata" of the traditions enshrined in our written Gospels. The uninitiated reader will hardly guess how much in these studies depends on conjecture, reconstruction, and hypothesis, with all the dangers of subjective judgment and involuntary misinterpretation of the data that attend these attempts at penetrating behind the Gospel to earlier literary forms or nonliterary traditions. The ground under the feet of scholarship is not so solid here as one might suppose, and the consensus among scholars is by no means so great as F. C. Grant (with many other popular expositions) suggests. But apart from that, what is the evidence of the New Testament itself in cases where we can actually observe the process? First Corinthians 15 is such a case. Here Paul is called upon to "actualize" the Gospel anew in the face of the fact that there were "some" at Corinth who denied the resurrection of the dead. How does Paul "actualize" the Gospel? Does he reinterpret and vary it? It does not seem so. He takes his readers back to the Corinthian Small Catechism: "Now I would *remind* you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the Gospel, which you *received*, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if *you hold it fast*" (1 Cor. 15:1,2). He recites once more, in the simplest possible terms, the basic facts of the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:3-11); and all that follows in Chapter Fifteen is, for Paul, not a "reinterpretation" or a "variation" of the Gospel but simply a spelling-out of what is already implicit in that Gospel. We may recall in this connection how Paul refers to the whole riches of his profound actualization of the Gospel in his Epistle to the Romans as

a "reminder" of what his Roman readers already knew. (Rom. 15:15)

Certainly there are variations in the accounts of the gospels; and certainly each gospel has its own accent and its individual kerygmatic thrust. And even if we are not as convinced as Irenaeus was of the divine "necessity" of just four Gospels, the four-ness of our Gospel is no accident, and it is our business as obedient hearers of the Word to listen to each gospel as it speaks in its tongue. But does the variation and individuality of the gospels justify us in setting up a pattern such as Frör's (actualization — reinterpretation — variation) and imposing it on them? And one must say that the pattern is *imposed*. Frör can say of Luke's Gospel: "In this new interpretation of the tradition the imminent expectation of the End {*Naberwartung*} is radically expunged" (p. 248). In the light of Luke 9:27; 21:32, 33, 34, 36, this can only be termed a crass exaggeration.

The statement that the words of inspired Christiaa prophets were not sharply distinguished from the words of the Jesus of history and were therefore freely injected into the record of Jesus' earthly ministry as veritable words of Jesus — this statement can be tested also. The letters of Rev. 2, 3, where the exalted Christ speaks through the Spirit to His churches, are often cited as evidence for the working of this process. But it is difficult to see the cogency of this evidence. The prophet on Patmos, in the Spirit on the Lord's day, is the spokesman of Christ, and his words are Christ's words. But he nowhere attributes these words to the Jesus of history, nor does he say that they were spoken by Him in the days of His flesh. Paul simi-

larly heard the words of his exalted Lord and has recorded them (2 Cor. 12:9). And this same Paul, who claims that Christ speaks in him (2 Cor. 13:3) and works through him in word and deed (Rom. 15:18), distinguishes clearly between his own word and a word spoken by Jesus in the days of His flesh. (1 Cor. 7:10, 12, 25, 40)

F. C. Grant's contention that the Old Testament was, for the first church, an authentic "source" for the life of Jesus is, first, an unwarranted exaggeration of the fact that the first witnesses to Jesus proclaimed Him as having lived, died, and risen "according to the Scriptures." Secondly, it prejudices the whole question of the relationship between the Old Testament and the New, the question of promise and fulfillment.

In the light of such considerations, one cannot assent to Frör's claim that the historical method "is the most reliable means we have of preserving the texts from arbitrary reinterpretation" (p. 49). Does it really serve to make possible what Frör calls "an understanding encounter with the text" (p. 61)? Does it not, rather, come between the interpreter and his text, making a genuine encounter with the text and a real discovery of the text's intention impossible? Ernst Fuchs, certainly not an opponent-in-principle of the historical method, has spoken words concerning it that startle and sober the thoughtful scholar:

The historical-critical method of Biblical interpretation is not only the result of the surrender of the Old-Protestant doctrine of verbal inspiration in the 18th century; beyond that, it is the modern variant of the principle of tradition in the interpretation of the Bible which prevailed in the ancient and medieval church. Just as men once,

long before the Reformation, emphasized the living tradition which proceeded alongside Holy Scripture, so historical-critical exegesis has placed *history* alongside the Bible. Even more: just as Scripture and tradition were not merely coordinated in the older church (so that dogmatic decisions could be made by the church . . . and Biblical interpretation had to submit to them *de facto*), so historical-critical Biblical exegesis has subordinated the Bible to history and has thereby removed from Scripture the predicate which marks it as superior to the world, the predicate "Holy."<sup>6</sup>

If there is truth in these words (and I am convinced there is) then we cannot stop with a criticism of the historical-critical methodology as methodology. We cannot agree with Frör when he says that, although "the techniques [of the method] are always subject to improvement and its results always subject to correction," still "all this can take place only within the domain of historical thinking and cannot mean any departure from it in principle" (p. 48). This is what must take place; we must depart "in principle" from "historical" as it has been defined since the Enlightenment if we are to break the spell of historicism and overcome the "dualism in interpretation" which Frör himself decries but has not overcome. Our criticism may not be merely methodological; it must be theological.

## II. THE OVERCOMING OF DUALISM IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Why is it that Frör has not succeeded in overcoming that dualism in Biblical interpretation which he himself recognizes and deprecates? As has been said, the failure

<sup>6</sup> Fuchs, pp. 159, 160.

is not merely a failure in method as such, and any just criticism of his position must be not merely methodological but theological. "Theological," however, does not mean that we abandon history and become unhistorical or even antihistorical in our understanding and interpretation of the Bible. That would not be genuinely theological, for the Bible "thinks historically." The God of the Bible is not the God of the philosophers, eternal Being, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, "der Ewig-tätige." And the fundamental and all-controlling message of the Bible is not eternal ideas but Good News, Tidings of what God has done for us men and our salvation. Frör is right in looking to the "total context of Scripture when he seeks to overcome the dualism which plagues modern Biblical interpretation; and he also is right in insisting that we must continue to interpret historically. Moreover, the "hearing and confessing church," to whose understanding of Scripture Frör appeals, also thinks historically; the creeds of the church, the utmost concentration of the Word of God by which the church lives, are historical—they recite the mighty acts of God, past, present, and future.

Frör's failure is due not to his insistence on thinking and working historically but to the fact that he is attempting to take an essentially secular conception of history up into the whole of the hermeneutical-theological work on the Biblical texts. This becomes apparent when, in his positive evaluation of the historical method, he says:

The Biblical texts are conscious of the fact that they are witnesses to God's creative action in history. But the effectual presence of God in history is a hidden pres-

ence, a presence hidden under the cross. The history of God's creative action cannot, therefore, be objectively distinguished (*abgehoben*) from the rest of the events that occur among pious and impious men. This history can only be recognized, confessed, and proclaimed in faith. This history, as it confronts us, is a wholly human and wholly earthly history. There are no external criteria by which we can determine that God Himself is here at work. It is therefore a legitimate function of theology to investigate this history with all the means at our disposal, in order to demarcate and recognize as clearly as possible the "craters" left by God's effectual action in history, repressing our understandable desire to have God's working set before us in gilded glory. And in this the historical method, with its inquiry as to how things really happened, can render us a real service. (P. 49)

At two points in this statement Frör has indicated that he is operating with assumptions which are derived not from the total context of Scripture and the confessing and hearing church's understanding of Scripture but from modern man's secularized historical consciousness. First, he is thinking nonbiblically when he declares that the "history of God's creative action cannot . . . be objectively distinguished" from any other history, sacred or profane, and can therefore be apprehended only by *faith*. Secondly, there is a similarly secular assumption underlying his judgment that the historical method can determine what "really" happened. "Reality" is here being defined as something which natural, secular men can apprehend and know. This his conception of reality is basic to his judgment on the hiddenness of God's creative action in history (God's presence being known only from

the "craters" that His bombs have made); it will be advisable, therefore, to take up this question of "what really happens" first.

#### A. *What "Really" Happens?*

Both Tacitus and Luke have left us descriptions of the same reality, the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Tacitus says that this is what really happened:

Auctor nominis eius [Christiani] Christus Tiberio imperitante per procuratorem Pontium Pilatum supplicio adfectus erat; repressaque in praesens exitiabilis superstitio rursus erumpebat, non modo per Iudaeam, originem eius mali, sed per urbem etiam quo cuncta undique atrocitas aut pudenda confluunt celebranturque. (*Annales*, XV, 44)

According to Luke this is what really happened: "The Word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily." (Acts 19:20; cf. 6:7; 12:24)

Obviously, each of the two men was describing what, in his view, "really happened." Obviously, too, each man's view of reality was determined by where he stood and what he believed in, by what he was. Now, the proverb says, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder"; and our artists, who teach us to see beauty where we never suspected it to be, prove the proverb true. The reality of beauty and the act of seeing on the part of the beholder cannot be separated; they are complementary aspects of one reality. Something similar holds of historical reality; dangerously subjective as it may sound, historical reality does not really exist *per se*. It exists in the eye of the beholder, in the mind and heart of the historian equipped to enter into it. Luke saw the reality of the spread of Christian-

ity rightly and recorded it truly because he looked upon this reality from a vantage point which was wholly different from that of Tacitus. At the three points which control a man's existence and give him an eye for reality, Luke was determined by the power of the Holy Spirit. Those three points are the Whence, the Where, and the Whither of man's life: the irrevocable past, the inescapable present, and the inevitable future. Luke came from his baptism, lived in the church, and looked for the Judgment and the life of the world to come. Luke was able to apprehend the reality of the history of the first church as the growth of the Word of the Lord in virtue of "the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (Tit. 3:5), in virtue of the fact that he was, as a child and member of the household of God, "led by the Spirit" (Rom. 8:14), and in virtue of the fact that he was "sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance" (Eph. 1:14), the Spirit who cried in him, "Come, Lord Jesus." (Rev. 22:17, 20)

We can behold and apprehend the reality which Luke beheld and recorded in the power of the Spirit only if we occupy his vantage point and stand where he stood. We can see what "really" happened only insofar as we share in the Whence, Where, and Whither of his life. To understand what this means, we must penetrate beyond "the confessing and hearing church" of Frör's statement to the ultimate realities which originated and still sustain the confessing and hearing church, to the work of God which creates, sustains, and consummates the church. How is the vantage point of the beholder of genuine reality constituted? Whence does he come?

Where does he stand? Whither is he going?

*Whence do we* (we cannot but speak of it personally) *come?* We come from our Baptism, and this determines our view of reality and gives us our capacity for beholding reality. Here in the midst of a highly mundane reality (a man, some water, some words, a rite) something remarkable happened, something supra-mundane. A miracle happened. At our Baptism God intervened in our life and forever determined our life. For this water was not simple water only but water used by God's command and connected with God's Word; this was a "washing of water *with the Word*" (Eph. 5:26). Here the Word of God was the ultimate and potent reality. Where God's Word works, there things "really" happen.

For this Word does what no other word, and no other power on earth, can do; this Word opens up the future, positively, graciously, everlastingly. By Baptism we are ushered across the threshold of death into "newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). As "heirs in hope of eternal life" (Tit. 3:7) we are removed from the old world where sin reigns in death and are made "dead to sin and alive to God" (Rom. 6:11); we have "been brought from death to life" (Rom. 6:13). And yet this word which gives Baptism its power does not ignore the past or empty the present. It has power to open up the future just because it is rooted in a past event, records and proclaims the past event, and is the vehicle of that once-for-all past event (Rom. 6:4, 9, 10). And just because this Word opens up the future, it signifies for the present; it determines and controls our present life (Rom. 6:1, 11, 13). This water connected with the Word

gives us the Holy Spirit; by Him we are sealed *now*, marked as God's eternal possession, for the future. (Eph. 1:13, 14)

This is our first lesson in history, in what really happens. What can really happen is not, for us, determined by laws of causality and development, by the consideration of analogies and normal probabilities. We know that with God all things are possible, for our Baptism was possible. We know now that the Word of God is the one potent factor in history, before which all else must give way, all powers and all possibilities and probabilities. And we know, too, that any conception of history which is not determined by the future (that is, by the Lord of the future) is partial and myopic and therefore, at bottom, false.

*Where are we?* We are in the church, members of the people of God. Like Baptism, the church can be viewed as a strictly mundane reality. It is an association of men, a social structure at a certain place and in time, with a constitution, an organization, officers, a meeting place, a set of conventions and customs, much like any other religious or secular association. But this, we know, is not the reality of the church. The reality of the church is what Bengel called the "people of God at Corinth"—a *magnum et laetum paradoxon*. The reality of the church is pure miracle in the midst of history. The church is the eschatological Twelve Tribes in the diaspora, made up of men brought forth by the Word of truth to be the firstfruits of God's new creation. (James 1:1, 18)

Again, it is the Word of God that wrought the miracle; the Word of God is the determinative reality. It is the Word of truth, God's own Word, that brought

forth the new Twelve Tribes. The great and joyful paradox of a people of God at Corinth is due to the fact that God's Word reached the Corinthians and called them to be saints (1 Cor. 1:2); it is due to the fact that "the testimony to Christ was confirmed" among them (1 Cor. 1:6). There is a church because the great light of which Isaiah spoke has dawned on men who sat in the region and shadow of death (Is. 9:2; Matt. 4:16), because Jesus the Christ has called men. The voice of the Good Shepherd has been heard, and His sheep listen to His voice (John 10:3-5). By this Word the church has been brought into being; by this Word the church is sustained and lives. The new people of God receive with meekness the Word implanted in their midst, the Word that has power to save their souls (James 1:21). The called saints of Corinth "stand" in the Word of the Gospel, must hold to that Word if they would be saved (1 Cor. 15:1, 2). The gathered sons of God live, as the Son of God lived, "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Matt. 4:4)

This Word of the Gospel is rooted in the past action of God, the death and resurrection of Christ. But it orients the church wholly toward the future. It is, in the last analysis, the future that gives the church its character and determines its existence. Without this opened-up future the church is merely another human association that can be aligned with and put on a level with other human associations; and without this opened-up future the church has no real reason for acting differently from men who seize upon whatever pleasure they can while they can: "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and

drink, for tomorrow we die," (1 Cor. 15: 32). But the future does belong to the church. The new Twelve Tribes are, even now, the firstfruits of the new world of God; in them the great shift of the aeons has, as it were, already taken place. The called saints of Corinth exercise their spiritual gifts in the tensed expectation of the eschatological "revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:7). The Spirit of God, Himself the "guarantee of our inheritance," works in the church as the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, giving men "eyes of the heart enlightened" to know what is the hope to which God has called them (Eph. 1:14, 17, 18). The Supper of the Lord looks back to the Cross; but it looks forward, too, to the new world and the new wine to be drunk in glad fellowship with the Lord (Matt. 26:29); in the celebration of the Lord's Supper the church proclaims the Lord's death "until He comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). The absolution pronounced in the church in the stead and by the command of the Lord Jesus Christ is an anticipation, as it were, of the Last Judgment. The prayer of the church is, "Thy kingdom come!" "Maranatha!" for the life of the church is hidden with Christ in God; when He appears, His church shall appear with Him in glory. (Col. 3:3-4)

This is our second lesson in history, in what "really" happens. Here we are given eyes to see that history is what the prophet calls it, "the LORD'S work" (Is. 10:12). When we see what "really" happened in the creation of the church, we see that it was just that, an act of creation (Eph. 2: 10), a making-alive of the dead (Eph. 2:1) and a calling into being of that which does not exist. All things are possible with

God, for the church is possible, the church in which we live. When Paul speaks of God's power for the church, he heaps up expressions of power as he does nowhere else (Eph. 1:19). It is when Paul has surveyed the intricate and wondrous ways that God goes in history in order to gather for Himself a people from among Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 9—11) that he bursts forth into the great doxology which marks God as the absolute Lord of history.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom  
and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable are His judgments and  
how inscrutable His ways!  
For who has known the mind of the Lord,  
or who has been His counselor?  
Or who has given a gift to Him  
that he might be repaid?  
For from Him and through Him and to  
Him are all things.  
To Him be glory forever. Amen.  
(Rom. 11:33-36)

This sole and universal lordship of God, known and acknowledged in the church, is the reality of history. This is what "really" happens: God works. Schlatter's comment on the closing verse of Paul's doxology is worth quoting here: "At the beginning of all history (*Geschehen*) stands His will and His power. And through Him are all things; there is no one who walks who is not made to walk by God; there is no one who knows and obeys who is not illumined by God; there is no one who acts who does not act as God's instrument."<sup>7</sup>

God's creative working is by His Word. The whole section, Rom. 9—11, is really all an explication of what Paul says early in Chapter 9: "It is not as though the

<sup>7</sup> Adolf Schlatter, *Gottes Gerechtigkeit* (Stuttgart: Calwar Verlag, 1952), p. 330.



Word of God had failed" (v.6). The Word of God, the promise of God, God's calling, and naming, the execution of the sentence of God, the voice of God in the Old Testament, the Gospel of God — these constitute the backbone of the three chapters.

This Word of God is a word that is directed toward the future and opens up the future. The Word of promise gave Abraham a future and hope when there was nothing to hope for. This justifying Word gave the Gentiles, who never pursued righteousness, a future and a hope. This Word gives even Israel, the disobedient and contrary people who refused the righteousness of God, a future and a hope.

*Whither do we go?* Coming from Baptism, living in the church, we confess concerning the Lord who has bought us: *Et iterum venturus est in gloria iudicare vivos et mortuos, cuius regni non erit finis.* We know that all roads lead to the throne of Christ. He will speak the ultimate, definitive word of God. In the light of that last Judgment we apprehend fully how mighty that word is; He who had the first word in creation shall have the last word in the Judgment — what word but His can have any validity in the history which lies between those poles? We take the full measure of "all things are possible with God" when we live in the expectation of the Judgment. This expectation of the Judgment and the unending reign of Christ casts its light upon the past and present too. We who live in this hope can see that the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ are eschatological acts of God; in them the Judgment and the endless reign of Christ are, as it were, anticipated. We can see, too, that when the Spirit witnesses, through

us, to Christ in this present world, convicting men, binding and loosing men with everlasting bonds and eternal liberation — the End has moved into the present.

This is our third lesson in history, this Whither of our lives. Here we learn what is "really" happening. It has become impossible for us to look upon history as an autonomous process, proceeding according to its own "laws." All the lives of men and nations, we know, move toward the Judgment throne of God. All history is under the free and sovereign judicature of God. The past is not subject to progressive devaluation anymore; past events are not subject to relativization. Under the judicature of God what happened once has happened once for all. The disobedience of Adam, the obedience of Christ, the apostolic witness to the Lord, our Baptism — these things are not "over" simply because they belong to the past. They fill the present; the present is not empty and meaningless but charged with responsibility and with hope. The Then of the Cross, the Now of the church, and the To Come of the Judgment have moved close together.

#### B. *The Hiddenness of God's Creative Action in History*

Coming from our Baptism, living in the church, and looking to the Judgment, we have a conception of historical reality which gives us eyes for the historical reality portrayed in the Bible. We are in a position to assess the truth of Frör's assertion that "the effectual presence of God in history is a hidden presence," that this history of God's creative action "cannot, therefore, be objectively distinguished from the rest of the events that occur

among pious and impious men," that there are no external criteria by which we can determine the fact that God is here at work. We are, then, also in a position to assess the validity of his conclusion that the historical method is the legitimate means of tracing the outlines of the "craters" which mark the spot where God's bombs have fallen in history. (P. 49)

### 1. The Speaking Acts of God

In what sense are the creative actions of God hidden? We may concede at once that no action of God's (before the return of the Son of man and the Judgment) is so manifest as His action that fallen man in his revolt against God cannot deny it, cannot blind himself to it and harden himself over against it. Man has this freedom; but it is a fatal freedom, for as Jesus Himself has said, man is driven to blaspheme in so doing; he commits the unforgivable blasphemy against the Holy Spirit when he blinds himself to the obvious working of God. (Matt. 12:31, 32)

For the purpose of this study we may leave aside the question whether Frör has not unduly sequestered the "creative action of God in history" from the rest of history in a way that is unbiblical and therefore theologically misleading.<sup>8</sup> We can proceed at once to the main question: Is the creative action of God as it confronts us a "wholly human" and a "wholly earthly" history, and are the "craters" left

by God's bombs the only evidence of His action accessible to the theologian-historian?

According to the testimony of the Scripture, God's actions are speaking, witnessing actions: the "living God who made heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them" has not left "Himself without witness" even outside His people, even in the pagan world (Acts 14:15-17). Perhaps the most comprehensive statement of the fact that all history is a moving witness to the presence and purpose of God is that of Paul in his Areopagus address: "The God who made the world and everything in it. . . . He made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after Him and find Him" (Acts 17:24, 26, 27). Here Paul represents all history as witnessing to God (as in Rom. 1 he represents all creation as witnessing to Him); and, however indefinite the content of this speech may be, one thing is certain: this speech is so insistently clear that man is responsible over against it. The "ignorance" of the nations in time past is, according to Paul, no venial ignorance. God "has fixed a day on which He will judge *the world* in righteousness" (Acts 17:31) and therefore calls "on *all men everywhere* to repent." (Acts 17:30)

But within this wide circle of universal witness God Himself has "objectively distinguished" His creative action in history, namely in the history of His peculiar people and in the history of His Son. Here we have speaking, witnessing acts of God in their highest concentration; here the perpetual miracle of His governance of

<sup>8</sup> Hans Walter Wolff observes: "Prophecy does not distinguish 'a sacred history' from 'profane as different in meaning.' . . . Neither Luther nor Melancthon separated ecclesiastical and profane history . . ." "The Understanding of History in the O.T. Prophets," in Claus Westermann, ed., *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation*, trans. James Luther Mays (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 342, n. 13.

history is singularly apparent. This history has a unique transparency and a particular eloquence in its address to man. God's actions in Israel's history speak a challenging and stirring language to all men. When the Lord smote Egypt on His people's behalf, Pharaoh could and did harden his heart (and God's judgment fixed him in his hardness of heart), but the magicians were moved to cry out: "This is the finger of God!" (Ex. 8:19). When the God of Israel acts, in judgment and deliverance, not only Israel shall "know that He is the LORD"; Moab shall know it (Ez. 25:11); the Philistines shall know it (Ez. 25:17); Tyre shall know it (Ez. 26:6); Egypt shall know it (Ez. 30:15); the nations shall know it (Ez. 36:23, 36; 38:16; 39:7, 23); "all flesh" shall know it (Ez. 21:5; cf. Is. 40:5). The "nations" need not content themselves with tracing the "craters" left by divine explosions in history. The peculiarity of God's actions in the history of His peculiar people in itself speaks a clear language.

What holds of the history of God's people holds also of the history of God's Son. It is distinguished from the rest of history in a way that makes the beholder responsible over against it. The Jesus of the Synoptics reproaches His contemporaries for not having heeded the voice of that history: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of Judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in

you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it shall be more tolerable on the day of Judgment for the land of Sodom than for you" (Matt. 11:21-24). Men are eschatologically responsible before the message of this history. And the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel likewise says: "If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have seen and hated both Me and My Father" (John 15:24). Even men who have not committed themselves to Jesus, even His arch-opponents, the Pharisees, are mysteriously moved by the witness of His messenger, Paul: "What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?" (Acts 23:9) Or men are moved to calumny and blasphemy: "He learned black arts in Egypt and misled His people," we read in the Talmud. The New Testament itself recalls similarly violent reactions: "He has a devil." "His disciples have stolen His body." No one seems capable of cool objectivity over against this history.

As for modern reactions to this history, Walther Künneth in a recent study, after surveying four treatments of Jesus (all of them secular in their approach), comes to the conclusion: "In the consideration of Jesus from a profane point of view, there is always . . . a point at which the traditional rational, psychological, or historical methods no longer suffice as a means of getting at the reality. There remains in the total picture an unexplored and unexplorable vista (*offener Punkt*), a coefficient of enigmatic uncertainty, an element of the nonanalyzable mysterious."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Walther Künneth, *Glauben an Jesus?* (Hamburg: Friedrich Wittig Verlag, 1962), p. 35.

This speaking character of God's action may not be minimized or ignored, as it apparently is in Frör's statement. But neither should it be inflated, as it has been in some modern conceptions of revelation. This speech of God's acts is an imperious word, which challenges man and makes him responsible. But it remains somehow mysteriously indefinite; it is neither God's first nor His last word to man. And it is certainly not His whole word.

## 2. The Acting Word of God

Thus far we have been speaking of God's creative action in history *per se*. From the Biblical point of view, there is something artificial and theoretical about this way of speaking. For God's creative action does not occur *per se*—at least not for the people of God, for the church, and for the theologian-historian. The most important, the most significant, the decisive aspect of God's creative action in history has not yet been taken into account, namely, the *Word of God*, that Word which precedes and announces His action, accompanies and interprets His action, and also follows and recalls His past action. If one consistently omits the Word of God from a consideration of His creative action in history, one is almost sure to misunderstand the action and to misinterpret the prophetic and apostolic record of the action.

The Old Testament scholar H. W. Wolff has given a definition of the prophetic conception of history which deals adequately with what is essential to our discussion: "*For the prophets, history is the goal-directed conversation of the Lord of the future with Israel.*"<sup>10</sup> In such a con-

<sup>10</sup> Wolff, p. 338.

ception of history the men of the "confessing and hearing church" can recognize that which is native and basic to their own existence; this conception is essentially akin to the Whence, Where, and Whither of their own life. The prime emphasis on the Word of God in the term "*conversation . . . with Israel*" answers to the role of the Word in their Baptism, their life in the church, and their expectation of the Judgment. The terms "goal-directed" and "Lord of the future" correspond to the experience of men who know how that Word of God has opened up the future for them. And "*Lord of the future*"—He who is Lord of the future is the absolute Lord of all, the Lord of history; here the men of the church recognize the God with whom all things are possible, their God, whose Word has transfigured the present for them and has given them a future and a hope.

This conception of history also harmonizes with the total context of Scripture. Even the lexical fact that the "Hebrew *dabar* denotes word as well as event," recounted history as well as experienced history, supports Wolff's prime emphasis on the word in his definition of history. And the close link between word and history is apparent in the actual functioning of the prophetic Word. "The future of God is anticipated in the prophetic Word. . . . History is imparted to the prophet in the Word. According to Amos [3:7], there is no future which does not appear beforehand in the prophetic Word," is Wolff's formulation of this connection.<sup>11</sup>

It is this presence of the Word of God as the prime force in Israel's history that makes Israel God's *peculiar* people: "Israel

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

is distinguished only by the continuous address of Yahweh."<sup>12</sup> In the fourth chapter of Deuteronomy Moses challenges the men of Israel to make a *religionsgeschichtlich* comparison between themselves and the nations, and he points to the fact that Israel heard the voice of God as the first proof of the peculiar people's uniqueness: "Ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing has every happened or was ever heard of. Did any people ever *hear the voice of God speaking* out of the midst of fire, as you have heard, and still live? . . . Out of heaven *He let you hear His voice* . . . and on earth He let you see His great fire, and you *have heard His words* out of the midst of the fire." (Deut. 4:32, 33, 36)

God promised His people that His Word would be with them always; and God kept His promise. He raised up for Israel, again and again, a prophet like unto Moses and put His Word into the prophet's mouth (Deut. 18:15-18). Not the king and not the priest but the prophet to whom "the Word of the LORD came" is the figure that characterizes and determines Israel's history.<sup>13</sup> In Israel the conviction was divinely fostered that the Word of God is the constant, enduring, powerful reality in history, the thing that "really" happens:

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 346.

<sup>13</sup> "Der Prophet ist die Schicksalgestalt des Alten Testaments. Wie das Königtum, so ist das Volkstum Israels durch einen Propheten begründet worden, und je und je hat die Prophetie den Charakter dieses Volkstums bestimmt." Otto Proksch, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1950), p. 128.

All flesh is as grass,  
and all its beauty is like the flower of  
the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades,  
When the breath of the LORD blows  
upon it;

surely the people is grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the Word of our God will stand  
forever. (Is. 40:6-8)

This conception of history is not peculiar to, or original, or original with, the prophets. As Wolff points out, "The roots of the prophetic view of history . . . are to be found neither in prophecy itself nor in the world of Israel's environment. They lie in the old Israelite tradition."<sup>14</sup> And is not the New Testament conception of history essentially the same? The Book of Revelation is perhaps most obviously the record of "a goal-directed conversation of the Lord of the future with Israel"—the great difference being that now the Lord of the future is the Son of man who can say of Himself: "I died and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." (Rev. 1:18)

But it is not only this prophetic book that continues the Old Testament prophetic tradition. The history of Jesus in the First Gospel, for example, is just as truly, if not quite so obviously, "the goal-directed conversation of the Lord of history [in Servant form] with Israel." The opening section, the genealogy and the seven fulfillments (Matt. 1:1—4:17), links this conversation with the earlier speaking of the Lord of the future and points up on every page how "goal-directed" that conversation had been. In what follows the words of Jesus mark Him out clearly

<sup>14</sup> Wolff, p. 348, n. 17.

as the Lord of the future. He claims for Himself nothing less than that He is life in the midst of a dead world (8:22), that His words will never pass away, though heaven and earth may pass away (24:35).<sup>15</sup> And all His words and deeds are both present revelation and potent promise for the future. E. g., He will make those whom He calls fishers of men (4:19); the hungerers and thirsters for righteousness shall be fed (5:6); the voice of Jesus will be the decisive voice on Judgment Day—His "I never knew you" spells eternal rejection (7:23); He will confess the faithful confessors before His Father (10:32, 33); He who has all authority in heaven and on earth will be with His own always, to the close of the age (Matt. 28:20); His word will welcome them into the Kingdom in the age to come. (Matt. 25:34)

The creative action of God in history may not be "objectively distinguished" by man, not even by "religious geniuses." Man will always be more impressed by the imposing colossus of world empire than by the stone cut by no human hand, which is the reign of God (Daniel 2), and man will write history accordingly. But God has objectively distinguished His creative action in history by His Word, the prophetic and apostolic Word. And since faith is pure relatedness to the Word which is the most objective fact in history, Frör has suggested a false antithesis when he sets "*objectively distinguished*" over against "*recognized, confessed, and proclaimed in faith*" (p. 49). For faith is not a vague subjective something in man, not merely an intuitive grasp of an other-

wise elusive reality; faith is simply radical openness for the great objective reality of the Word of God, a being-determined by the Word which is the essential history of the world. Only the believer can, in the last analysis, be an "objective" historian, for he alone is open to the objective reality of history, the Word of the Lord of the future.

With such a conception of history (which must be given us again and again by the Spirit), we can overcome the fatal dualism of modern interpretation; we can resolve the tension between the historical and the theological (for now the historical element has become genuinely theological). Now we can have a genuinely "understanding encounter with the sacred text." What a difference such a conception of history would make, for example, in the understanding and interpretation of the Gospels! It is a commonplace of Gospel interpretation today that our Gospels are all *written* from the standpoint of the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus; they are the voice of the Easter faith of the church. That is true enough, but this leaves unanswered the question why the Gospels are written from this perspective. Was this perspective given with the history itself or was this imposed upon the history by the (inspired or uninspired) reflection of the church? If we take Jesus seriously as the Lord of history in a goal-directed conversation with His people (and that is the way to which we are pointed both by Jesus' Bible and by the Gospels in their present form), then the answer to our question is obvious. The record of Jesus is oriented toward the future of Jesus as the exalted Christ and Lord because Jesus' words and works were from the beginning oriented in that direc-

<sup>15</sup> Note that Jesus makes an even higher claim for His own words than He makes for the Torah, Matt. 5:18.

tion. Then the fruitless discussion of Jesus' "Messianic consciousness" can cease; then critical scholarship can cease making *vaticinia ex eventu* of His predictions of His passion and resurrection; then the weary debate concerning which words of the Christ are to be considered authentic and historical *Verba Jesu* and which are the theology of the first church projected back into the record can finally be ended. And exegesis can again be a *ministry* whose task is to let the Christ grow great before the church's eyes.

With this prophetic conception of history we are in a position to see the secularized conception of history for what it is, how it differs at every point from history as conceived of and written by prophets and apostles, the spokesmen of the Lord of the future in purposeful conversation with His people. Here *God* is in the center and is all in all; there, fallen *man* in the *mataiotes* (Rom. 1:21) of his mind. Here the Word is *the* power in history; there the Word is distrusted—the father of the lie has made it serve the *lie*, and man's thinking and speaking has become what Schlatter calls it, *Traum, Schaum, und Geschwätz*. Here the *future* is always being opened up by the Word of God; there the future is a closed door, a blank wall.

Frustrated man in his frustrated world *must* make legends; he must gild the facts of his existence, or he cannot endure them. He has no future, and so he has need for dreams. Frustrated man *must*, in virtue of his godless *mataiotes*, reinterpret and vary. But the prophets and apostles and the apostolic church, who worship the LORD who changes not and serve the Lord Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, *they* have no need for varia-

tion. Theirs is the inexhaustible Word of the constant God, unchanging amid all the changes of history, inexhaustibly rich for every need of man in a changing world. The Christian interpreter is set free not *for* variation but *from* the need and the compulsion to vary. Finally, the Promise and the Gospel of God is God's No! to that history of alienated man which ends monotonously with "And he died." To measure the probabilities of the creative action of God's Word in history by the "laws" of that history is as fruitless as it is perverse.

### III. DANGERS

#### A. *Docetism*

If the dualism of Biblical interpretation is to be overcome, the conception of what is "historical" (and, in consequence, what is meant by "critical") must be radically revised. The decision concerning it must be made, in spite of the fact that Biblical scholarship generally still accepts the historical-critical method as almost axiomatically legitimate and useful, for the decision is a theological one, a religious one, a decision of faith. Now, we all know that every theological decision involves the danger of a reaction into an opposite extreme. We all are inclined to think that two nails hold better than one. In this case the danger is that the reaction take the form of a flight from history. In emphasizing what needs emphasizing, the miracle of the Bible, what von Hofmann calls its *Wunderbar-charakter*, we run the risk of ignoring its historical character, with all the splendid color and variety that belongs to history. We can forget that earthiness of Biblical history which our creed has held fast in the phrase *sub Pontio Pilato*. There

is a real danger of a sort of hermeneutical and exegetical *docetism*.

How shall we escape that danger? The only sure and safe way is to observe the inspired texts themselves, to be wholly and completely open to the operation of the Spirit who originated them and does His work through them. He will teach us. It is both useless and presumptuous to speculate how the Holy Spirit *ought* to operate or how He *might* have operated or *could* have operated. As believing exegetes under the Scriptures we have only one choice, that is, to observe how the Holy Spirit *did* operate. What is the nature and the color of the words uttered in the power of the Spirit? Are they the words of men living in a sort of religious ghetto, with a vocabulary and an imagery entirely their own, or are they the words of men who are in the mainstream of history, with a living relationship to all the sounds, scents, sights—and people round about them? In other words, are the inspired words relevant to the history and the culture of the men who uttered them? We can confine ourselves to the New Testament in indicating what the answer which the Scriptures give to our question is.

The very fact that the New Testament in *Koine* Greek, the cultural Greek, the cultural common denominator of the Mediterranean world in the first century, is in itself a witness to the fact that the Holy Spirit speaks in terms that are relevant to the history and culture of the people whom He addressed. The Spirit took the risk, as it were, of having His message Hellenized (which it was not) in order that the Lord and Judge of all might be proclaimed in the language of all.

Jesus, whose every word was spoken "in

the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14, 15), spoke always in terms and images that were close and germane to the lives of His Palestinian hearers. The materials of His parables are taken from the world that every Palestinian knew: the garden, the farm, the kitchen, the fisherman's trade, master and slave, weddings, feasts, fastings, going to court, wineskins, patched clothing, the boy who left home, the dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Even Jesus' strictly "religious" vocabulary was historically relevant to first-century Palestine. His language is saturated with the juices of the Bible of His people, the Old Testament. But beyond that, many of the expressions which we have come to think of as characteristic of Jesus, terms not directly traceable to the Old Testament, are expressions which He shares with the synagog: "little faith," "treasure in heaven," "the righteous who have no need of repentance," "kingdom of heaven," "inherit the kingdom of heaven," "from above," "this world and the world to come," "the prince of the world," "paraclete," "the judgment of Gehenna."<sup>16</sup>

When Jesus inveighed against the rottenness of the Judaic tradition that had grown up around the Law and had actually obscured the will of God revealed in the Law, He did so in terms of a concrete, culturally relevant instance. He cited the example of the Corban-vow (Mark 7:11 to 13). He alludes to it so briefly, as something perfectly familiar to His hearers, that we should be hard put fully to understand His denunciation of this sorry piece

<sup>16</sup> For a much longer list of such terms, see Adolf Schlatter, *Die Geschichte des Christus* (Stuttgart: Calwar Verlag, 1923), p. 34, n. 1.



of scribal casuistry if we did not have access to rabbinical writings concerning it.

One of the most striking instances of cultural relevance in the words of Jesus occurs in the parable of the pounds (Luke 19: 12-27). He describes the nobleman who entrusted his servants with the pounds before beginning his journey as going "to a far country to receive kingly power and then return" (v. 12). This is not the obvious or usual way for a nobleman to achieve kingship, and it must have struck his hearers. Then when they heard Jesus go on to say that the nobleman's "citizens hated him and sent an embassy after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us'" (v. 14), they surely became aware that Jesus was speaking in terms close to their experience. They could not but recall a piece of history that had taken place within their memory. They would think of Archelaus, the son of Herod the Great, who went to Rome to get his right to the throne confirmed by the emperor, over against the claims of his brother Antipas. While he was in Rome, a Jewish deputation appeared there petitioning the emperor to refrain from appointing any member of the Herodian house as king over the Jews. Thus we see Jesus stating His highest claim (that He is the Anointed King) and making His mightiest promise (that He will return in royal power and glory to reward and judge) in terms of a tawdry bit of Judaic court history. This, surely, is cultural relevance: this is hitting people between the eyes.

The apostles are disciples of their Master in this respect also; even Paul, the apostle born out of due season, is a follower of Jesus in the matter of cultural relevance. The example that first comes

to mind is his use of the altar inscription *To the Unknown God* in his Areopagus sermon (Acts 17:23). Paul invades the domain of a false, polytheistic religion to find a term, or an idea, which will enable him to proclaim the true God to the men of Athens in a relevant and compelling way. He does so without making any concessions to paganism (in fact, he uses the Athenian inscription as the basis for an attack on Athenian paganism, Acts 17:24 to 29), and without sparing his hearers the proclamation of impending judgment and the call to repentance (Acts 17:30, 31). But he does use historically relevant material drawn from paganism to make his point. And he goes on to quote a pagan poet toward the same end. (Aratus, Acts 17:28)

The letters of Paul likewise give evidence of this striving for cultural relevance. Jesus had used no metaphors drawn from athletics. There were amphitheaters, stadia, and hippodromes in Palestine too, of course, but the world of Graeco-Roman athletics remained remote from the life of the average Jew. In Paul's writings, however, there is a free use of athletic imagery (e. g., Col. 1:29; 1 Tim. 4:7-10; 2 Tim. 4:7, 8; 1 Cor. 9:24-27), despite the fact that the great athletic festivals (such as the Olympian or the Isthmian games) were pagan religious celebrations.

"Our *politeuma* is in heaven," Paul writes to the Philippians (3:20). Whatever the exact shade of meaning we attach to *politeuma* ("conversation," or "citizenship," or "commonwealth," or "metropolis"), it seems certain that Paul is alluding to Philippi's status as a Roman *colonia* with inhabitants who, though resident in Philippi, are *citizens* of Rome and proud

of it. Paul is using a relevant aspect of civic life to bring home to the Philippians where their life is centered and what its real glory is.

In 2 Cor. 11:22-33 Paul "boasts," chiefly of his sufferings. It has been suggested by Fridrichsen<sup>17</sup> that in this "boasting" Paul is consciously imitating the style of oriental royal inscriptions and of the *res gestae* inscriptions of Roman emperors, in which these worthies leave the world a record of their accomplishments. This would explain the lack of connectives, the frequent use of numerals, the recurrent "often," and other unusual stylistic features. This would be another example of how the Spirit prompted men to use a culturally relevant pagan form for Gospel purposes. Paul is in effect saying when he uses this form: "I can 'boast' with kings and emperors, if need be; but I must boast of my sufferings, for my conquests are the conquest of the suffering Anointed King."

John provides another example; it has long been recognized that the term used for Christ in the Johannine Prologue, *Logos*, had "cultural relevance" for the Greek world of the year 95. The fact that this aspect of *Logos* has often been wildly exaggerated should not blind us to this reality or lead us to ignore it. Gerhard Kittel has expressed the nature and extent of this cultural relevance carefully and precisely:

"It is quite believable that word speculations in the world around the New Testament were not without influence [on John's use of the 'Word']. The situation is this: four things coincide: *first*, the

early-Christian view, or conception, of Jesus as the 'Word'; *second*, the likewise early-Christian conviction concerning the eternal, divine, pretemporal existence of the Christ; *third*, the recollection of the Biblical account of the creative word spoken 'in the beginning'; *fourth*, the *logos*-myths and *logos*-theories of the time. This situation induced the author of the Prologue to take up the key word of these last [*logos*-myths and *logos*-theories] and to make it the thematic word of his sentences. It is a key word which is also suggested to him by the speech of the Bible and of early Christendom. But he gives this key word a new place and a new accent. One could express it by writing a variation on Paul's words in 1 Cor. 8:5: 'As there are many gods and many lords' — and many "words." . . . The author presents *his Logos*, who is the one and the only Word and was — 'in the beginning'; the *Logos* who is not a speculation about an indeterminate intermediary being and not a metaphysical personification of a mythical concept but, in Jesus, a manifested Person and in Him 'the Word.'"<sup>18</sup>

The Book of Revelation, written by John while he was "in the Spirit on the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10), provides many examples of cultural relevance. A few examples will have to suffice. We look in vain within the Scriptures for a clue to the meaning of the seven stars in the hand of the One like a Son of man in the inaugural vision (Rev. 1:16). The members of the seven churches were probably familiar with the seven stars as a symbol of

<sup>17</sup> Anton Fridrichsen, cited by W. G. Kümmel in the *Anhang* to Hans Lietzmann, *An die Korinther* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1949), p. 211.

<sup>18</sup> Gerhard Kittel, λέγω, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1932—), IV, 137.

worldwide dominion; they appear as such on imperial coins. The inspired prophet is, then, taking a pagan symbol and is using it to deny the imperial claim. "Jesus," he says, "not Caesar, is Lord." And when the seven stars are interpreted to signify the "angels of the seven churches" (Rev. 1:20), the prophet is telling his threatened and fearful contemporaries: "We the church, not Caesar, shall reign on earth." (Cf. Rev. 5:10.)

In the letter to Philadelphia Christ gives to him who conquers this promise: "I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God" (Rev. 3:12). This spoke directly and relevantly to the men of Philadelphia. Philadelphia, a city of many temples, "had a lovely custom which concerned these temples. When a man had served the state well, when he had left behind him a noble record as a magistrate or as a public benefactor or as a priest, the memorial which the city gave to him was to erect a pillar in one of the temples with his name inscribed upon it. Philadelphia honored its illustrious sons by putting their names on the pillars of its temples. . . . So the risen Christ promises to the man who overcomes: 'I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God (Rev. 3:12).' Not in any heathen temple, but in the very house and family of God, will the name of the man who is faithful be inscribed."<sup>19</sup>

William Barclay's generalization on this manner of inspired speaking is worth quoting: "All through this letter to Philadelphia we see how the message of the risen Christ came to the people of Philadelphia in language and in pictures that they could understand. He took its history,

He took the things that happened in everyday life, He took the civic practices which all men knew, and out of these earthly things He formed the heavenly message."<sup>20</sup>

This mode of interpretation can be misused and has often been misused, as every good gift of God has been misused. The Spirit's sovereign freedom in confiscating any and every facet of human experience and history for His purposes *can* be (and has been) misinterpreted as a servile borrowing; thus the Scriptures come to be viewed as a product of their environment, as one more product of the human spirit and not *the* product of *the* Spirit. The Department of Exegetical Theology of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, has in a recent (1963) opinion warned against this abuse of the historical study of the Scriptures, by spelling out the assumptions under which historical study is to be carried out. These assumptions are: "1. That . . . the . . . study . . . is carried out in believing submission to the inspired Scriptures as witnesses to our Lord Jesus Christ, so that purely rational considerations are excluded. 2. That the evidence of the Scriptures themselves is given prime consideration and that the employment of extrabiblical evidence is subordinated to it. 3. That the inspired Scriptures are recognized in their uniqueness and that formal and substantial analogies with other writings are to be considered in the light of that overriding fact; that the interpreter must be aware of the possibility that he may be imposing alien classifications upon the Biblical materials and may be judging it by norms inappropriate to it. . . . 4. That in the case of Old Testament figures, institutions, and

<sup>19</sup> William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches* (London: SCM Press, 1957), pp. 98 f.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

events the witness of our Lord and His apostles be given due consideration."

There is a danger in this exegetical process, one that should be soberly recognized. But, it should be remembered, the opposite danger is an equally great danger, that of a bloodless and pale docetism. We need to remember that the historical work is only the stairway leading to the door of the text; when we have climbed it, we can see *what* door and *what kind of* door we stand before and desire to enter. (That is, we recognize the text in its particularity and its uniqueness.) It is not the key that unlocks the door, to be sure; the door is unlocked from within. But it would be both senseless and a mark of ingratitude toward the God who builds stairways to despise the stairway just because it is not the key.

#### B. Schematism

There is another danger to be recognized and faced. It is this: when we see how the historical method dissolves the records of the mighty acts of God into myth and legend, we are inclined to react in the opposite direction. We incline toward making of the true and indispensable principle of the *sensus literalis* a dry schematism, a pattern that we impose on the texts rather than find in the text. The God who created birds and inspired the psalms is a poet, the Poet; that is a fact we dare not forget. His Spirit speaks through prophet and apostle in figure and symbol, in the living language of men, who feel and will and act with the precision of passion. And He speaks thus even when recounting and interpreting history; one might even say, just when He is recounting and interpreting history.

For example, the Song of the Vineyard

in Isaiah 5:1-2 is all symbols; but the symbols speak of events, of God's love for His people documented by His deeds in that people's history and of Israel's apostatizing "wild grapes" response to the love of God. This is a prophetically interpretive account of a genuine history, and the symbols do the interpreting. The symbols make that history an indictment which the house of Israel and the men of Judah cannot ignore or evade. (Cf. Is. 5:3-7.)

Jesus, the ultimate Prophet to Israel, recounts history in this prophetic-symbolic fashion also. Jesus' parable of the wicked husbandmen is a prophetically interpretive account of Israel's history down to His own day. The account of the outrageous treatment of the Owner's messengers is symbolic, of course; but the symbol recounts and interprets history. The slaying of the Owner's Son was becoming history even as Jesus spoke. (Cf. Matt. 21:45, 46.)

Most of Jesus' parables are capsule history in symbolic or figurative form. The parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son are Jesus' prophetically interpretive account of the history which His opponents had told in literal "historical" fashion when they said: "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). Which of the two accounts is the "true" one? Jesus' account is the "truer" one just because it is the prophetically interpretive account employing symbols.

Likewise the parables of the two sons, the barren fig tree (Luke 13:6-9; note the context), the sower, the new cloth on an old garment, the strong man bound, the mother bird gathering her young, are all historical in character; they deal, not only

with timeless truths but with the history that is being enacted before His contemporaries' eyes, the history of the Servant Messiah going His way of ministry to the cross. Jesus told history in this way because He was the Caller of Men, the Evangelist. By recounting history in this economical, plastic, and poignant manner He sought to open men's eyes to the fact of God's royal reign active in their land and in their time. The key to the understanding of the parables is just the fact that they recount the history of Jesus of Nazareth. The parables blind and harden the men who refuse to take them as history in symbol, who will not draw the line from the symbol of the strong man bound by the Stronger to the "weak" Jesus of Nazareth, whose history is being recounted and interpreted in the parable.

Paul is recounting and interpreting the history of Israel when he speaks of the "Baptism" and the "Supper" of Israel in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:1-4). He is recounting the history of God's dealings with Jew and Gentile when he speaks of the tree and the engrafted branches (Rom. 11:17-24). He is recounting history in a prophetically interpretative way, by means of symbol, when he tells the Corinthians: "I became your father in Christ Jesus through the Gospel." (1 Cor. 4:15)

But, it may be urged, in these cases, there always seems to be some indication that symbolic language is being employed. What of books that present themselves as *literal narrative*? Our Gospels certainly present themselves as straightforward accounts; they are what the titles given them by the church imply, *Good News*. Yet, are they so absolutely and unqualifiedly straightforward and symbol-free as the

term "news" suggests? The genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 is as prosaic a series of "begats" as can be imagined. Yet even here the symbolic has its place. Matthew has given this series a symbolical structure of  $3 \times 14$  generations, skipping some generations in order to do so, and he himself calls attention to this symbolism (Matt. 1:17). The presence of four women in the genealogy seem to have symbolic significance also. This symbolism of structure is found throughout the First Gospel.

The Book of Acts is certainly straightforward narrative; the value of the book depends entirely on the historicity of its content, the having-happened-ness of the events recorded. But even here we find a symbolic paralleling of the careers of Peter and Paul, as well as a symbolic paralleling of the wanderings and sufferings of Paul and his Lord. And Luke's recurrent refrain, "The Word of the Lord grew," is not the language of prosaic chronicle. It is the symbolic language of a prophetic interpretation of history.

The employment of symbol in the recounting and interpreting of history is an ever-present possibility in the Scriptures. We must reckon with this possibility most strongly there where the thing narrated is without parallel in our mundane, day-by-day — or even century-by-century — existence. To take the most obvious examples: Our life knows nothing of an absolute end. (The people who say, "Death ends all," cannot ever quite believe it.) It is stupid and graceless to impose a "must" on the Holy Spirit; but speaking from where we sit in this dark aeon, absolute endings *must* be told in sign and symbol, or they cannot be told at all. The end of this world, and the definitive, the last judgment on sin —

how shall these be conveyed to us who live in a world where sin is the constant, given, dominant reality of human life, a world where every judgment on sin is only penultimate (the judge who imposes the death-sentence adds the words, "And may God have mercy on your soul")?

The fact is that the Spirit does speak of Last Things in suggestive symbolism. The Scriptural accounts of the end of the world are so far from being diagrammatically clear and consistent that orthodox theologians have wavered between the conception of an absolute annihilation of this world and a *de novo* creation on the one hand and recreative restoration of this world on the other hand, and they have often, wisely perhaps, left the question open. What all these accounts say to our consciences and our hope is abundantly and blessedly clear.

Take the two most detailed accounts of the Last Judgment that the New Testament offers, Matt. 25:31-46 and Rev. 20:11-15. Theologically they are absolutely at one; both speak to our consciences and to our hope in the same way, for both emphasize the fact that our acquittal in the Last Assize is due wholly and solely to the eternal gracious counsels of God ("O blessed of My Father," "the book of life") and the fact that our believing lives have spelled out the verdict which we shall hear on the Last Day ("You did it to Me," "judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done"). But in detail the two accounts differ at almost every point. Not even the person of the Judge is absolutely identical (Son of man; enthroned God). The inference is clear. The language is, in both accounts, the language of prophetically-interpretative symbols;

and symbols need not be identical in order to agree.

We are all haunted by a fear when we consider this mode of interpretation. We ask: Whither will this lead us? Where does it end? May we not be led by the logic of our methodology to the point where we rarefy all God's great actions for us men and for our salvation into principles and abstractions, ideas that may be exciting intellectually but cannot sustain us now in our *tentationes* nor help us in the hour of death? May we not finally conclude, for example, that the prime fact, the one on whose reality the whole future of mankind depends, the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is only a symbolic way of saying that the influence and power of Jesus somehow persists beyond His death and determines the lives of His followers?

To this fearful question two answers must be given. First, the prophetic-interpretive representation of an event employing symbols does not call into question the historicity of the event. When Peter speaks of Jesus' resurrection in terms of travail and birth ("the pangs of death," Acts 2:24), he is asserting the reality and historicity of the event. Secondly: To recognize the presence and value of symbolic language in a narrative where it is probable and recognizable is one thing; it is quite another thing to make of the reality corresponding to the symbol a mere symbol. In the case of the resurrection of our Lord, there simply is no evading the fact that for every one of the chosen witnesses to that event, the resurrection is fact; it happened. According to these witnesses, the soldiers guarding the tomb fled in terror; the grave was empty and the grave-

clothes lay there neatly folded—even the Judaic rebuttal could not deny the empty tomb. The risen Christ was seen by many and on various occasions. He spoke to them; He ate before them. He overcame their doubts. Paul in 1 Cor. 15 (probably the earliest written account of the event) nails the factuality of the resurrection down at all four corners and stakes the existence of the apostolate, the apostolic proclamation, the apostolic church, and the hope of mankind on the reality of the event of the resurrection. Whoever turns away from this has parted company with the New Testament, with the witness of the Holy Spirit.

There *is* a danger here; if we recognize it, we are forewarned against it and can avoid it. If we in panic fear refuse to face this characteristic of the inspired texts, we are ignoring what the Psalter and the whole history of Christian hymnody has taught us: That the language of poetry is the most powerful, the most moving, and, in the last analysis, the truest and most accurate form of speech.

### C. Intellectualism

In 1942 Hermann Sasse published a penetrating and moving study of Bultmann's program of demythologization. It has been reissued, with a new foreword, by Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf, in the November 1964 issue of *Lutherische Blätter*. We should be grateful to him for having made this still-relevant study readily available again. For the problem to which it speaks is not only radical Bultmannism but the whole historicism which has created that dualism in the interpretation of the Scriptures of which we have been speaking. He entitled his study *Flucht vor dem Dogma (Flight, or Retreat, from Dogma)*. In his

closing paragraph Sasse points out that the judgment which he has passed on Bultmann's theology holds also for a large section of evangelical theology in our day; this theology, he says,

... is at bottom still a form of the Neo-Protestantism which was born of the Enlightenment. The infallible token of this Neo-Protestantism is its lack of understanding for the dogma of the church and, in consequence, its inability to grasp the great objective truths of divine revelation. That is the tribute which the evangelical churches pay to modern culture; in the payment of this tribute the shameful dependence of the church upon the world finds expression. It was in the battle against the dogma of the church at about the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries that the modern world came into being. Since that time all modern men have, as it were, an inborn *ressentiment* against all that can be called the confession, the doctrine, the dogma of the church. Even where men exult in the rediscovered Confessions one finds that they are still unconsciously in flight from dogma, the doctrinal substance of the Confessions. There will have to be much work done, and a profound revolution in theological thought must take place before this secret flight from dogma (which is in truth a flight from the Holy Scripture's claim to authority over us) is overcome and the church has regained her spiritual freedom from the world ...

We have not yet, as a church, participated in this flight from dogma. But perhaps we should ask ourselves: Has the sight of the dissolution of dogma after dogma under the onset of historical-critical exegesis so terrified us that we have taken flight *into* dogma? And has not this flight into dogma resulted in a kind of intellec-

tualism in our proclamation and our teaching? One of our older Missouri pastors said not many years ago: "We are a Catechism- rather than a Bible-church." He did not intend the remark as a criticism; but is not this "rather than" an indictment of our church? If it is a justified indictment, it means that we have not permitted our treasured Confessions to exercise their *hermeneutical* function, to lead us into Scripture and through Scripture. Surely there is truth in Gerhard Gloege's statement: "The [written] Confession is the basic rule of Biblical heremeneutics. . . . A Confession is in force only insofar as it is capable of exercising its function of interpreting Scripture."<sup>21</sup>

Whatever our response to this indictment may be, we must admit that a certain intellectualism has crept into our preaching as a result of our flight into dogma. The sermons we hear have dogmatic substance, to be sure; they are clear and precise. And these are great and undeniable virtues. But how often this clarity and this precision have been achieved at the cost of plasticity, concreteness, and relevance. The particular text is not expounded in its particularly; rather, it becomes merely the point of departure for the treatment of a dogma as such. The preacher flees from the New Testament to his catechism or his dogmatics. If his conscience troubles him because he has, as it were, substituted a dogmatic map for the kerygmatic landscape of the New Testament, he can always take comfort in the fact that he has

preached a "solid doctrinal sermon, and that is what the people need."

Some preachers have reacted against this intellectualism in the direction of sentimentality and pietistic legalism, with all the loss of dogmatic-kerygmatic substance that this involves. That is, of course, no remedy. The remedy lies not in preaching less dogma but in preaching more dogma, dogma in all its Biblical fullness, richness, and relevance—as a direct and compelling Word addressed to us. The remedy lies in really letting the Confessions do their hermeneutical work, to let them give us eyes to see and ears to hear what Scripture presents in lavish color and variety. In the warm climate of the inspired texts the seeds of the dogma will expand, sprout, and blossom into a living proclamation that both instructs and moves.

The hermeneutical function of our Confessions is to serve the preaching, the proclamation, of the church: "*Our churches teach with great unanimity*" (Augsburg Confession, I). Peter Brunner's statement is a genuinely Lutheran one: "The decisive interpretation of Scripture is . . . the eschatological sermon, not historical-critical exegesis."<sup>22</sup> In this connection a word should be said regarding the hermeneutical function of the liturgy, that other great gift of God to the Lutheran Church. The Lutheran liturgy provides an ideal setting for this "decisive interpretation of Scripture." Here the movement of the church year is a constant reminder of the eschatological character of our interpretation of

<sup>21</sup> Gerhard Gloege, "Bekenntnis, V., Dogmatisch," *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3d ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1957—), I, 997.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Brunner, cited in Otto Perels, "Bericht . . ." in "Die Verbindlichkeit des Kanons," *Fuldaer Hefte*, 12, ed. Friedrich Hübner (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1960), p. 78.



Scripture, for here we are continually reminded that God is "on the way," in movement toward His last goal of judgment and consummation — and we are reminded, too, that we the church are the wandering people of God, on the way, looking toward the city that has foundations. Here the eschatological horizon is perpetually being opened up, in the confession of sins and in absolution, in the praise, prayer, proclamation, and confession of faith, in the receiving of the blessing of God, for "I will bless thee" is both the primeval and the eschatological Word of God to His people. (Gen. 12:2; Matt. 25:34)

And here in the liturgy, Word and Sacrament are kept together in their essential and organic unity. This unity of Word and Sacrament is a perpetual reminder to the proclaiming interpreter that he is not in the last analysis "dealing with" the Word of God; he is being dealt with by the God who in His Word is present and active to judge and to save. Here, too, the eschatological horizon is opened up, when we are taught to conceive of the Word of

God thus, we know that every proclamation of it is an anticipation of the Last Judgment. For with every proclamation the Light goes forth into the world: "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. . . . but he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God." (John 3:19,21)

On this soil intellectualism cannot really grow. In this climate the dualism in Biblical interpretation (which is still the plague of Biblical theology in our day) can be overcome. Here where we stand completely under the Word, there can be a genuine understanding of the Word; here there can be true interpretation of the Word. Here even the exegete can live in the hope that he, too, may one day hear that overwhelming word: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant . . . enter into the joy of thy Lord!"

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