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Hermeneutics and the Teacher of Theology

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AFTER DISCUSSING THE USE AND MEANING OF THE TERM "HERMENEUTICS," THE author explores both the historical and the critical dimensions necessary in contemporary Biblical study and shows how teachers of theology, their students, and pastors can derive great benefits from such historical-critical studies of the sacred Scriptures.

Hermeneutics is one of the "in" words for practitioners of theological onepmanship.

Just as "eschatology" was the reigning catchword in theological circles for a long, long time, "hermeneutics" is increasingly the password to the circle of those who have arrived theologically.¹ Heiko Obermann's words are not only true of the post-Bultmannians² and the Roman Church.³

¹ Heiko A. Obermann, "Introduction: the Protestant View of the Bible: Hermeneutics," *Christianity Divided: Protestant and Roman Catholic Theological Issues*, ed. Daniel J. Callahan, Heiko A. Obermann, and Daniel J. O'Hanlon (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962), p. 75. The popularity can also be seen in the extensive bibliography compiled by Norbert Henrichs, *Bibliographie der Hermeneutik* (Düsseldorf: Philosophia Verlag, 1968).

This paper was originally prepared and read to a conference of teachers of theology in the colleges and seminaries of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod some years ago. The text has not been revised beyond removing some allusions to contemporary events now irrelevant. Additions have been made to the notes to call attention to some later publications. I published a survey of modern hermeneutical literature under the title "A Survey of Trends and Problems in Biblical Interpretation," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XL (1969), 276 to 293.

² See Ernst Fuchs, *Hermeneutik*, 2d ed. (Bad Cannstadt: R. Müllerschön Verlag, 1958);

Protestantism in general⁴ and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in particular share the interest.

This current interest, however, does not make for clarity in the use of the term "hermeneutics," which is capable of several interpretations. Does the term "hermeneutics" in the title stand in opposition to "hermeneutic" or is its use nonreflective? Is it to be defined in its traditional sense as that branch of theology

in which the principles and rules are set forth by means of which we may discover the true sense of Scripture and give a cor-

The New Hermeneutic, edd. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb (New York: Harper & Row, 1964); Robert W. Funk, "Colloquium on Hermeneutics," *Theology Today*, 21 (1964), 287 to 306; Ernst Käsemann, "Zum Thema der urchristlichen Apokalyphtik," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 59 (1962), 259.

³ John L. McKenzie, "Problems of Hermeneutics in Roman Catholic Exegesis," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 77 (1958), 197—204.

⁴ See, for example, Kurt Frör, *Biblische Hermeneutik*, 2d ed. (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1964); Nels S. F. Ferre, "Notes by a Theologian on Biblical Hermeneutics," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 78 (1959, 105—14; James Luther Mays, *Exegesis as a Theological Discipline* (Richmond, Va.: Union Theological Seminary, 1960); note also the symposium in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 77 (1958), 18—38.

rect exposition of the meaning which the Holy Spirit has laid down in the words of Scripture? ⁵

Or is it to be understood in the sense that F. F. Bruce used it in a review of a commentary on Hebrews, when he stated that its author has

confined himself to exegesis and not gone on to hermeneutics (the interpretation of the lessons of the book for the situation of its readers today); the remoteness of the sacrificial ritual with which Hebrews is so much concerned makes the hermeneutical task especially difficult in this epistle? ⁶

For this conservative scholar hermeneutics is the exposition and application in modern terms of the meaning of the text derived by exegesis, that is, the *sensus literalis sive historicus*.

The modern German discussion, brought to our shores primarily through the efforts of James M. Robinson,⁷ gives the term a much broader application than those already cited. Gerhard Ebeling, for example, has defined hermeneutics as "the explicit or implicit grasping of the ultimate conditions for understanding."⁸ He has then drawn the inference that hermeneutics no

longer describes the methodology of exegesis alone, but rather of all theological study.⁹ Kurt Frör¹⁰ has called hermeneutics the "doctrine of understanding." "Hermeneutic now takes the place of the classical epistemological theory . . ." ¹¹ In this hermeneutic (note the singular!) the Word is not something to be interpreted, but is itself an interpreter, having a "hermeneutical function." Ebeling's *Gesprächspartner*, Ernst Fuchs,¹² speaks of hermeneutic as "faith's doctrine of language." Hermeneutics in this extended sense (which James Robinson claims is its original sense) has been called "the New Hermeneutic."¹³

This division in the understanding of hermeneutics is not completely new. It can be traced back into classical formulations of the sense of the term. Thus the first Lutheran hermeneutics, written by Matthias Flacius Illyricus in 1567, bore as its title *De sermone sacrarum litterarum plurimas generales regulas* (Part II of his *Clavis scripturae sacrae*).¹⁴ In 1761 J. A. Ernesti had said:

Hermeneutic is a science which leads a

⁹ Ebeling, "Word of God and Hermeneutic," *The New Hermeneutic* (see note 2 above), pp. 91 f.

¹⁰ Frör, p. 12, "Lehre vom Verstehen."

¹¹ Ebeling, "Word," pp. 93 f.

¹² Fuchs, *Hermeneutik*, p. 101. See also James M. Robinson, "Hermeneutik since Barth," *The New Hermeneutic*, p. 55.

¹³ Robinson, pp. 3—7. Other scholars who have participated in the German development have been Hans Georg Gadamer, Manfred Metzger, Eberhard Jüngel, and so on. Strong opposition has been voiced by Kurt Frör, Hermann Diem, Oscar Cullmann, and Ernst Käsemann. For a more extended treatment see my article listed in note 1 above and the bibliography referred to there.

¹⁴ See note 5 above.

⁵ [Ludwig Fuerbringer], *Theological Hermeneutics* (N. p., n. d.), p. 2, § 1. This definition is the classical one. Matthias Flacius Illyricus in 1567 entitled the second part of his *Clavis scripturae*, the first Lutheran hermeneutics, *De ratione cognoscendi sacras litteras* (cited according to the edition published in Leipzig: Johann Justus Erythropolus, 1615).

⁶ F. F. Bruce, in *Christianity Today*, 9 (July 2, 1965), 25, reviewing Hugh Montefiore, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

⁷ See note 2 above.

⁸ Gerhard Ebeling, "The New Hermeneutic and the Early Luther," *Theology Today*, 21 (1964), 34.

man to the subtlety both of understanding and interpreting the sentences of any author, or a science which hands down an account of the meaning, to be discovered and explained with subtlety, of all words.¹⁵

Such a definition of hermeneutics is clearly concerned with determining the meaning of the words as written by men under the inspiration of the Spirit. It is concerned to formulate the rules and principles that guide interpretation, for example, *usus loquendi, ne tropus ultra tertium, sensus literalis unus est, analogia Scripturae*, and so on (all taken from Fuerbringer). Its task is to say what the text meant when written, what God meant to say. It is not concerned with the application of that meaning to modern problems or concerns. It does not make an application to the present day. That is left to the systematician and the preacher. Having this restricted function, hermeneutics is correctly described as a helpful but not absolutely necessary branch of theology (Fuerbringer, par. 3).

There is another, broader definition of sacred hermeneutics that was used early in Lutheran theology. Johann Jakob Rambach in 1723 defined hermeneutics as follows:

Taken in a first sense, it is a practical faculty by which the Christian, equipped with a good mind and with the tools of a good mind as they might be at his disposal and aided by the light of the Holy Spirit, investigates the meaning of the Scripture from the Holy Scripture itself, to his own

¹⁵ *Institutio Interpretis N. T.*, as translated by Ebeling in *The New Hermeneutic*, p. 90, note 16. The Latin reads: "Hermeneutica est scientia, adducens ad subtilitatem tum intelligendi, tum explicandi auctoris cuiusque sententias, sive tradens rationem sententiae quorumque verborum subtiliter et inveniendas et explicandas."

benefit and salvation. In a second sense, "sacred hermeneutic" is a practical habit by which the theological doctor, sufficiently equipped with the necessary tools, under the guiding light of the Holy Spirit, is made capable of legitimately investigating the meaning of Scripture, and after this investigation, of explaining it to others and applying it wisely so that in this way the glory of God and the salvation of men is promoted.¹⁶

This definition, especially in the second sense, is close to that of August Pfeiffer (b. 1640), dictated to Dr. Walther's classes in the 1870s:

Sacred hermeneutics is a sacred attitude and aptitude of the practical mind, by whose effects a man, in doubt about the intent of the Holy Spirit, is led through appropriate means to uncovering the true meaning of the sacred text and expressing it to the glory of God and the edification of the church, not only for his own desired certainty and certitude.¹⁷

¹⁶ J. Jacob Rambach, *Institutiones hermeneuticae sacrae* (Jenae: ex officina Hertungiana, 1732), p. 2, trans. Ebeling, *The New Hermeneutic*, p. 89. The Latin reads:

Priori modo accepta, est facultas practica, qua homo Christianus, bona mente et obviis bonae mentis adminiculis instructus ac spiritu sancti lumine adiutus, scripturae sensum, ex ipsa sacra scriptura, ad suam utilitatem ac salutem scrutatur. Posteriore modo accepta hermeneutica sacra est habitus practicus, quo doctor theologicua, necessariis adminiculis sufficienter instructus, praelucente spiritu sancti lumine, idoneus reeditur ad sensum scripturae legitime investigandum, investigatumque aliis exponendum et sapienter applicandum, ut hoc modo Dei gloria et hominum salus promoveatur.

¹⁷ August Pfeiffer, *Thesaurus hermeneuticus sive de legitima scripturae sacrae interpretatione tractatio luculenta* (Lipsiae & Francofurti: sump-tibus Mart. Gabr. Hübneri, 1704), p. 10 (my translation). The Latin reads:

Hermeneutica sacra est habitus mentis prac-

One could also compare with Pfeiffer's definition the words of C. G. Hofmann:

Exegetical theology is a practical attitude given by God by which a theologian is equipped to discover the sense of Holy Scripture and to demonstrate it to others by definite means and aids, in order that convinced by the mind of the Holy Spirit he might be able to promote the understanding of men toward salvation and the honor of God.¹⁸

One notes in Rambach, Pfeiffer, and Hofmann an additional note not present in Ernesti. The practical, functional side of hermeneutics is strongly underscored: it is concerned with proclamation for God's glory and the salvation of men. The church is to be edified. A similar concern for proclamation characterizes the New Hermeneutic. A concern for relevance in the modern world is not yet enough to argue that a theological opinion has deserted the traditional hermeneutical stance.

This essay will attempt to describe briefly some aspects of the task of Biblical interpretation. Its purpose is to arouse discussion. The topic is large; the essay necessarily fragmentary and incomplete.

ticus sacer, cujus opera homo de intentione spiritus sancti dubius per media appropriata perducitur ad verum textus sacri sensum eruendum et exprimendum in Dei gloriam, ecclesiae aedificationem, nec non desideratam ipsius interpretis *asphaleian* et certitudinem.

¹⁸ C. G. Hofmann, *Institutiones theologiae exegeticae* (ed. nova. St. Louis: ex officina Synodi Missouriensis Lutheranae, 1876), p. 1 (my translation). The Latin reads:

Theologia exegetica est habitus practicus θεόδοτος, quo theologus ad sensum S. Scripturae inveniendum atque aliis demonstrandum certis mediis et subsidiis instruitur, ut de mente Spiritus S. convictus nominum ad salutem informationem Deique honorem promoveri queat.

I

THE DIMENSION OF HISTORY

When Paul in 1 Cor. 15:1-5 appeals to the basic, kerygmatic core of the Gospel, it is evident that history and proclamation are closely joined to one another. Paul makes known that Gospel that he had received and transmitted, namely,

that Christ died on our behalf according to the Scriptures and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures and that He appeared to Cephas.

That Christ died is clearly history. That this death happened *kata tas graphas* and that it happened on behalf of our sins is proclamation.¹⁹ What Cullmann has taught us to call early Christian creeds are marked by the use of the first person plural. History is valued because it is history that is more than merely antiquarian. This history is the basis of proclamation in the present. It is this joining of history and proclamation that gives Biblical interpretation its specific character. Biblical interpretation has as its object a history that is proclaimed as saving and believed on by those who truly hear.

Such a statement, however, also raises what must be regarded as a significant factor. When one looks at other "creeds" in the New Testament, one is struck not only by their unified interest in history but also by their variety in interpreting it. 1 Cor. 15:3-5 lays stress on Jesus' death as the

¹⁹ See 1 Cor. 1:18-24; Col. 2:9-15; 1 Peter 3:18. On early creedal formulations see Oscar Cullmann, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (London: Lutterworth, 1949); Vernon H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964).

atonement deed of Christ.²⁰ But the culmination of Peter's sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2:36; cf. 22-23, 32) regards the death as an evil inflicted by the Jews and stresses the resurrection as that act of God which made (*epoiësen*) Jesus Lord and Christ.²¹ "Let all the house of Israel therefore assuredly know that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." A third early Christian creed or hymn (Col. 3:16) stresses almost entirely the exaltation of Jesus:

He [literally "Who"] was manifested in
the flesh,
vindicated in the Spirit,
seen by angels,
preached among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory. (1 Tim. 3:16 RSV)

Note how this passage reduces the earthly ministry of Jesus to one line: "manifested in the flesh." There is no mention of death or resurrection. The six lines fall into the scheme of the ancient near-Eastern enthronement sequence: elevation, proclamation, acclamation.²²

These three creeds emphasize three different aspects of the history of Jesus Christ. They are united in regarding that history as of decisive importance for all men. In all three Jesus is proclaimed as Lord, Messiah, or Exalted King. He is who He is because of what He was. The precise mode of exaltation is described in different fashion. The reader or the preacher today who wishes to proclaim that Jesus as Lord and Messiah in a responsible fashion (*publice*

docere as Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession states) is faced with certain questions. Which of these confessions of the New Testament best lends itself to proclamation today? Are there possible dangers in a concentration on one of them to the exclusion of the others? One can certainly multiply these questions. On the purely historical level, the interpreter may wish to know whether all of these confessions characterized all branches of the early church or if some were later expanded or discarded.

Such questions can only be answered as the texts of the New Testament are understood historically. Only as the interpreter is clear in his own mind as to the problems and needs to which these creeds spoke, only when he knows the *damnamus* that is the inevitable concomitant of every creed, only when he, moreover, sees how the Biblical author who quotes these creeds uses them, can he speak their message to his own day with its needs and problems. The interpretation depends on some such knowledge, for only then are the false interpretations ruled out and the true made clear.²³ *Mutatis mutandis*, some sort of similar analysis could be made of the creeds in the Old Testament. (For example, see Deut. 26:5 ff.; Joshua 24:16 ff.; Neh. 9:9 ff.)

This historical interpretation involves two dimensions. On the one hand, the books of the New Testament are books written to particular people at particular times. If one wishes to see how true this is, he should imagine for a minute that Colossians had been sent to Philippi and

²⁰ See Phil. 2:6-8.

²¹ See Rom. 1:3-4.

²² See Eduard Schweizer, "Two New Testament Creeds Compared," *Neotestamentica* (Zürich and Stuttgart: Zwingli Verlag, 1963), pp. 122-35.

²³ J. Gresham Machen, "History and Faith," *Princeton Theological Review*, 13 (1915), 1 to 15.

vice versa.²⁴ Much that is in the letters would have been dark and unclear. "Every book of the New Testament is written for the times; if we are to get the meaning which these books have for all time, we must first get at the meaning they had for the first time."²⁵ As Robert Preus has expressed it, ". . . the premise that the writers of the Scriptures wrote out of their cultural framework and for their own time . . . is essentially correct."²⁶ That premise is one that we must share, since the Biblical authors wrote for specific people and times. Formulated sharply, these books were first of all God's Word for the men to whom they were written.²⁷

It is only as this historical sense is uncovered that the wine of the Gospel is prevented from being watered down to an unsatisfying thin grape juice, to a generalization that removes the marrow from its bones, to a kind of "speculative transcendence."²⁸ It is a part of the very nature of the Biblical revelation that it is historically conditioned. Today the Bible is an ancient book. Those who boggle at this

²⁴ Willi Marxsen, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1963), p. 19; Eng. trans., *Introduction to the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), pp. 12—13.

²⁵ Martin Franzmann, "Essays on Hermeneutics, II," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XIX (1948), 642—43.

²⁶ Robert Preus, "Schriftautorität, Offenbarungsverständnis und historisch-kritische Methode," *Lutherischer Rundblick*, 11 (1963), 182—83 (my translation).

²⁷ Marxsen, p. 16; Eng. trans., p. 9.

²⁸ Ferre, p. 110. See also Roy Harrisville, *His Hidden Grace* (New York: Abingdon, 1965), p. 68. The wine figure was taken from Eduard Schweizer, "Die historisch-kritische Bibelwissenschaft und die verkündigungsaufgabe der Kirche," *Neotestamentica*, p. 139.

phrase need to spend one year teaching New Testament Greek, or even more, Biblical Hebrew — to say nothing of Aramaic. We are separated from this book by 18 centuries of history and more. It is not a magical book, not an oracle (like the *Book of Mormon*, or *Science and Health*). It is not derogatory to God's Bible to say that "it speaks directly only to the men of its own time."²⁹ It is the task of historical study to make us its contemporaries, to put us into Palestine and Corinth. Only so can we understand the *skopos* of the New Testament creeds. Only so do we learn that the capital S on Spirit in the second line of 1 Tim. 3:16 in the RSV is wrong. Only as the antithesis of flesh and spirit as two realms is clear to us in its original sense do we understand the *pneumati* as local rather than instrumental.

But there is another dimension to the historical character of the Biblical books. It is not only the historical gap between us and the origin of the Biblical materials that demands the context of history. The books themselves with the proclamations, acclamations (see Rev. 5:12), and creeds in them point back beyond themselves to another history. "This Jesus whom you crucified hath God raised from the dead." And this resurrection was "according to the Scriptures." The history of Jesus lies one stage earlier than the documents we possess. Easter and Pentecost have intervened. The understanding of His disciples had

²⁹ Ernst Käsemann, "Zum gegenwärtigen Streit um die Schriftauslegung," *Das Wort Gottes und die Kirchen*, ed. Fritz Vierung (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), p. 20; Eng. trans. under the title "Thoughts on the Present Controversy about Scriptural Interpretation," *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 273.

been opened (Luke 24:27, 44-49), they had become witnesses. And that witness included the witness that His life and death were *kata tas graphas*. No doubt existed about this in the early proclamation. Indeed it is to be found in the Passion predictions of Jesus themselves. But it is exceedingly difficult to point to specific passages in the Old Testament that must be predictive prophecies of Jesus' death.³⁰ Moreover, the plural "Scriptures" suggests that the totality of the Old Testament, not just snippets here or there, is in mind. The question is raised as to how the history of salvation demonstrates the continuity of God's dealings with His people in judgment and mercy, while yet keeping the radical newness that Israel sensed in the presence and teaching of Jesus. (Matt. 7:28-29)

Is Jesus the grand finale to the Old Testament, or the radical beginner of something new? The problem of continuity and discontinuity is raised in yet another direction. The one title that Jesus used of Himself, reticently and in a less than clearly self-demonstrative way to be sure, was "the Son of Man." The other titles are never on His lips. When applied to Him by others, He either places a seal of silence on their lips (Mark 3:12) or immediately reinterprets them in terms of "the Son of Man," even at Caesarea Philippi and before the high priest. Yet, with but one exception (Acts 7:56), His own title for Himself is avoided by the early church, and the other great titles that He avoided (Son of God, Messiah, Son of David, the Prophet, the Coming One, the Lord) are applied to Him. The reasons for such radical discontinuity are properly the

³⁰ Hos. 6:2 has been suggested; see Schweizer, "Creeds," pp. 122-24.

concern of historical investigation, and scholars may come to differing conclusions about the answers.³¹

When we say "historical investigation" we mean the application of the methods of historical research to the Bible. This means the best methods that current scholars have devised. None of them is ruled out *ex hypothesi*. Because the Biblical texts are documents, the student will strive to obtain all the evidence important for the understanding of them that he can gather: linguistic, literary, archaeological, historical, cultural, religious. He will use the methods of philology, textual and literary criticism, papyrology, form criticism, even psychology.³² Hearing the text empathically means that the student of the text seeks to understand the document in its present form. Where the possibility that a text is the result of a literary and/or historical process is suggested by the text or parallel material, the relation of the present text to its sources should be examined.

Such historical work depends on careful observation.³³ On the basis of his observations a student makes syntheses and forms hypotheses. Since the historian's craft includes explanation of origins, he will seek, where possible, to give the etiology of ideas

³¹ For an orientation in the debate see Ferdinand Hahn, *Christologische Hobeitstitel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963); Eng. trans., *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (London: Lutterworth, 1969).

³² Oscar Cullmann, "The Necessity and Function of Higher Criticism," *The Early Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), p. 13.

³³ I am heavily indebted for the following to Adolf Schlatter, *Die Theologie des Neuen Testaments und die Dogmatik. Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie*, 13, 2 (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1909), pp. 34-54. This work is eminently in need of translation.

and documents. Historical research is concerned with chronology, since it also attempts to describe the conceptual chronology within the New Testament or the Old. Schlatter puts it as follows:

Statistical work leads naturally to suggestions of an etiological nature, through which we describe the processes out of which the New Testament arose. The New Testament does not consist of a series of statements, each standing next to the others in peaceful independence, but of statements that are tied to each other through the living bond of basis and result, of the conditioned and that which conditions. We must not bring in an idea of causality to the New Testament that is foreign to it. The New Testament itself provides us with one, since it presents its content before our very eyes as that which develops.³⁴

This passage describes our concern well. The interpreter must determine which ideas exist side by side without direct relationships (for example, the three creeds mentioned above) and that which exists in a causal or temporal relationship (for example, Dan. 7:13-14 and the "Son of Man" title on Jesus' lips). The interests of historical work are all inclusive; the interpreter doing historical work observes and notes even those things that the systematician regards as unimportant. Remarkable on the unique use of "Son of Man" on Jesus' lips, he will ask the systematician how this detail shows up in his Christology. He will mark what is unique. Equally important, he will note omissions and ask about them. Why, for example, do the creeds previously cited not say anything about human conduct?

In discussing and evaluating his material

³⁴ Schlatter, pp. 36—37 (my translation).

the interpreter will let his categories grow out of the Biblical material. He will make no assumptions as to which categories belong under the same general head. The interpreter will note variations within the same general category. Thus he will note the emphasis on the death of Jesus in 1 Cor. 15:3-4, while at the same time Paul's concentration on the resurrection line of the creed in the context will not escape him. Moreover, he will attempt to account for such variation in terms of the original *skopos* of each.

In all of this the interpreter is bound by the matter he is interpreting (*sachgebunden*), not by some pragmatic need that he may feel the students before him will have in their future calling. This is part of being under the Word and, at the same time, of the historical integrity of the interpreter.³⁵ This has more than casual importance for people who train men for the service of the church. Interpretation cannot be determined by pragmatic needs. Students who are being prepared for the ministry today have many different goals in mind: the inner city mission, suburbia, the rural parish, secondary education, the foreign mission field, the ministry of writing, to say nothing of the fact that the church will ask others to serve as professors, administrators, officials, executives, counsellors, and budget raisers — and all this in a world that is rapidly changing. What unites all these people before us is nothing more or less than the common need of understanding the Scriptures. To

³⁵ See Erich Dinkler, "Das Wort Gottes, die Bibel und die wissenschaftliche Methode," *Fragen der wissenschaftlichen Erforschung der Heiligen Schrift*. Sonderdruck aus dem Protokoll der Landessynode der Evangelischen Kirche im Rheinland (Januar, 1962), p. 7.

be bound to go where the text takes a person is the meat of interpretation. It is only that which will equip men to interpret a Word to which they have been taken captive to a rapidly changing world. Obedient to the Word, such men deserve an equally Word-bound interpretation. Historical research and Biblical interpretation are, after all is said and done, nothing more and nothing less than empathic and responsible hearing.³⁶

Such *sachgebunden* interpretation on historical grounds will correct in the long run such errors as interpretation will make. Here is a case in point. In 1899 Concordia Publishing House published a book which contained the following interpretation of the concept *basileia*:

Jesus' proclamation at first glance sounds like that of His forerunner: Repent, for the Kingdom of God is close at hand. . . . God now wants to establish through Christ, His Son, a kingdom on earth and open to the sinners on earth the treasures of heaven, grace, justification, life, and blessedness. All who are penitent, who are sorry for their sins in the depths of their heart, and believe the Gospel are part of that kingdom and as its citizens share in all its rights and privileges.³⁷

A little over 60 years later (1961) the same house published another book in which John's proclamation of the *basileia* was described in the following words:

He spoke of the near advent of God the King. "Kingdom of heaven" stirred a

³⁶ Ernst Käsemann, "Zum Thema," p. 259, criticizes the New Hermeneutic for confusing understanding and decision. To hear means for him to let what is heard keep its own validity, its own foreignness.

³⁷ Georg Stoeckhardt, *Biblische Geschichte: Neues Testament* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1899), p. 51.

thousand memories in every pious Jew and roused a mighty hope. John did not explain to his contemporaries what the "kingdom of heaven" was or tell them that there was a "kingdom of heaven." No good Jew needed to be told what the kingdom of heaven was. His Old Testament told him that on every page; it meant: "Thy God reigneth."³⁸

Sixty years stand between these two quotations from Stoeckhardt and Franzmann. The theological difference is far greater. The first quotation speaks of the kingdom as a static organization in which men have rights before God. The concluding words sound almost like a parody of the traditional graduation formula, "with all its attendant rights and privileges." The second view is shared by every reputable scholar in the world today. For such an interpreter *basileia* denotes a dynamic, eschatological concept of an active, moving, judging, and redeeming God through whom salvation and vindication are brought to God's people. The interpretations are radically different.

What made the change? Not the Missouri Synod. Stoeckhardt's view is one shared with much 19th-century historicism, with Harnack and the Social Gospel. It describes the good kingdom of God on earth. But Stoeckhardt might have known better, for seven years earlier (1892) Johannes Weiss had dropped a theological bombshell in his work *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (2d ed., 1900). Today we all share in the benefits of Weiss' historical research. We take for granted that "kingdom" and "church" are not identical. And we praise God for the riches of Scrip-

³⁸ Martin Franzmann, *Follow Me* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 16.

ture, while overlooking the fact that we are here inheritors of the fruits of historical criticism.

Two areas of historical research deserve special mention since they are frequently specially downgraded. To take the historical situation seriously means also to take the question of literary form seriously. Literary forms and fashions change. The poem called the dramatic monolog would have been impossible in Roman times, while the diatribe of popular Hellenistic-Roman philosophy is strange and foreign to us. There is reason to engage in *Formgeschichte*. Perhaps the study done on the use of "we" passages in ancient historiography is relevant to the study of Acts.³⁹

Formgeschichte (the German word is superior to our form "criticism") allows us to see how the early Christians expressed their knowledge and faith. The hymn in Col. 1:15-20, quoted and commented on by Paul, is a good example of its values. The hymnic character of this passage has been recognized by most scholars. The hymn by itself presented an overzealous creation theology which stated that dominion had been established over the demonic world forces by the act of creation. Paul's insertions corrected this false view of the Colossians by the reminder that reconciliation was achieved through the blood of the cross. This reconciliation makes Jesus *dominus designatus* of the entire cosmos, whose lordship is established through the proclamation of the kerygma. It is the cross that redeemed men from the curse of a hostile and demonic world, not the simple act of creation. It is in the church as

His body that Jesus exercises the lordship of the Christ, a lordship that is being extended to every creature (Col. 1:23, similar in thought to 1 Cor. 15:20-28). Here the form-critical identification of the hymn and the Pauline commentary inserted into it and expanded after it enables one to determine the specific Pauline emphasis in the passage as well as the nature of the opposition.⁴⁰ At Colossae Paul is critical of the Colossian theology because it is a theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*). Whatever is valid must be a theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) in its literal sense. Such an investigation gives us a glimpse into the church life and theological thought of the first century, a great gain indeed.⁴¹

A similarly positive evaluation of *Formgeschichte* in Old Testament studies has

⁴⁰ Such an identification of pre-Pauline fragments has enabled some scholars to solve to their own satisfaction the problems raised by the linguistic peculiarities of Colossians and Ephesians. See, for example, Gottfried Schille, *Frühchristliche Hymnen* (Berlin: Evangelischer Verlagsanstalt, 1962). On Col. 1:15-20 see Martin H. Scharlemann, "The Scope of the Redemptive Task (Colossians 1:15-20)," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, 36 (1965), 291-300. To his bibliography the following items might be added: Eduard Schweizer, "Die Kirche als Leib Christi in den paulinischen Antilegomena," *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, 86 (1961), 241-56, reprinted in *Neotestamentica*, pp. 293-316; James M. Robinson, "A Formal Analysis of Colossians 1:15-20," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 76 (1957), 270ff.; Harold Hegermann, *Die Vorstellung vom Schöpfungsmittel im hellenistischen Judentum und Urchristentum* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1961); Beda Rigaux, *Paulus und Seine Briefe* (München: Kösel Verlag, 1964), pp. 192-97.

⁴¹ Ernst Käsemann, "Probleme neutestamentlicher Arbeit in Deutschland," *Die Freiheit des Evangeliums und die Ordnung der Gesellschaft*, ed. E. Wolf (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1952), p. 148.

³⁹ See Jaques Dupont, *The Sources of Acts* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1964).

been given in *The Springfielder* by Manfred Rönsch:

Gerhard v. Rad has taken up the form-critical position of Gunkel, but has greatly modified it, so that one could draw the conclusion that such a consideration measures up the true essence of Holy Scripture better than any other method with which the historico-critical research has approached the Old Testament.⁴²

He has comparable good things to say about this tool in the New Testament scholar's workbox.

The other side of historical work that is frequently feared is the application of *Religionsgeschichte* and its results to the New Testament (or to the Old, for that matter). As W. C. van Unnik has said, however, "The full brightness and impact of Christian ideas only shines out in its ancient surroundings and not in the dim light of a quasi-eternity."⁴³ There can be no question that the surroundings include a religion-impregnated society. "The sky hung low in those days" is how Gilbert Murray, a great classicist, expressed it, if my memory does not play me false.⁴⁴ For the New Testament this religious world includes Palestinian Judaism and its Hellenistic counterpart, Greek philosophy and pseudo-philosophy, mystery religions, magic and divination, and the whole shadowy under-

world of religious superstition. Israel came into a land inhabited by Canaanites and lived out her history in a country surrounded by devotees of fertility and nature religions. High places and sacred prostitution were part of that world. The possession of the house gods might well be necessary to establish the right of inheritance.

A study of the Palestinian concept of the *malkuth shamaim* and a reading of the *Shemoneh esreh*, a first century prayer of the synagog, will show that Jesus' originality does not consist in novelty. None of the key terms in his preaching required definition, whether "kingdom of God," "Son of Man," or even *ekklesia*, "church." A comparison of the Dead Sea scrolls and Acts will show the similarity in organizational structure between the Qumran community and the early church. Paul quoted from the Septuagint and pagan authors, used the hermeneutical methods of his day, and adopted the terminology of demonism used in Greek syncretism. In 1 Cor. 10:1-4 he uses the later Jewish idea that the rock from which water flowed in the desert followed Israel around like a kind of portable water fountain.⁴⁵ The simple fact of such linguistic or even conceptual "borrowings" says nothing. What is important in the case of this cultural relevance, or even borrowing, is that it be used to understand the true sense of the New Testament or the Old. Kurt Frör has stated it well:

⁴² Manfred Rönsch, "A Critical Investigation of the So-Called Historical-Critical Method in the Interpretation of Holy Scripture," *The Springfielder*, 28 (1964), 38. He also says positive things about Jeremias' use of *Formgeschichte* in New Testament studies.

⁴³ W. C. van Unnik, "ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη — a Problem in the Early History of the Canon," *Studia Patristica*, IV (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1961), 217.

⁴⁴ In a work entitled *Five Stages of Greek Religion*.

⁴⁵ See W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 2d ed. (London: S. P. C. K., 1958); Martin Dibelius, *Die Geisterwelt im Glauben des Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1909); Heinrich Schlier, *Der Epheserbrief*, 4th ed. (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1963); *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (New York: Herder, 1961); Hugo Odeberg, *The View of the Universe in Ephesians* (Acta. Univ. Lund, N. F., Avd. I, 29, 6, 1933).

The question should not be raised as to whether the Bible is to be studied in the light of the history of religions. Without any reservations the Bible lies open to such *religionsgeschichtlich* comparisons. For, since God does His deeds in history, He allows Himself thereby to be classified in the world in which religious phenomena often look so much like one another as to be interchangeable. Indeed, He often allows it to go so far that interchange not only takes place, but that through such *religionsgeschichtlich* study the unique character (*Einzigartigkeit*) of the Biblical proclamation is underscored in the light of its contemporary world. The study of religious history and the Bible does not at all conclude with a radical erosion and leveling of the Bible, in which the Bible loses all its peculiar character; rather it makes clear what the Bible, for all its rootedness in its own world, has to say to it as its own peculiar and unique Word. One should not study the Bible as a part of the history of religion with fear and reservation. All depends on recognizing and properly using this method of such eminent value.⁴⁶

Historical research is part of the search for the *sensus literalis*. It uses *Formgeschichte* and *Religionsgeschichte* because the literal sense is made clear by so doing. Thus it follows the guidance given as far back as 1567 by Matthias Flacius Illyricus, who insisted that the words of a text must be understood in the sense they would have for their original hearers.⁴⁷

It is not to be claimed that the methods used in historical study are in some fashion

specially Christian. Indeed, it must be admitted that like all methodical procedures they are secular and profane (in its etymological sense), restricted in their value, and even dangerous. Those who use them must remember their application only to such material as is their proper object. Such methodological, scientific inquiry is basically the heritage of the Greek, non-Christian world, whether it is used in the area of Biblical studies, systematics, or any of the profane sciences (one remembers that the Greeks coined the word *methodos*, not the Semites).⁴⁸

We should therefore be aware of the necessity of historical study, convinced that we cannot go back simply to the view that prevailed prior to the historicism of the 19th and the enlightenment of the 18th centuries. Historical thinking is trained into the citizens of our world with the beginning of their education, never to disappear. The questions raised by this type of mind are here to stay; they are part of the warp and woof of the fabric of modern life. One does not practice historical inquiry because it is the latest fad. To retreat into an ivory tower will not deliver today's students, their future parishioners, or The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod from the questions of history. What we must know are the necessity, the values, and the limitations of historical inquiry. Then, as is the case with all God's gifts, we must use it doxologically.

II

THE CRITICAL DIMENSION IN BIBLICAL STUDIES

There can be no doubt that the use of historical methods will raise questions, to

⁴⁶ Frör, p. 49 (my translation).

⁴⁷ Flacius (above, note 5 *altera pars*, col. 82). His words deserve careful study. See also E. C. Blackman, *Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), p. 172.

⁴⁸ Dinkler, p. 6.

which the historical method proposes to suggest answers. One of my relatives recently asked me, "Why does 1 Peter seem to expect Jesus' return in just a very short time (see 1 Peter 4:7), while 2 Peter (3:4 ff.) suggests quite a long time will go by before he comes?" One might multiply such questions easily. Does Galatians 2 tell of the same meeting as Acts 15, the Jerusalem council? If so, why does Paul state so strongly with God as his witness that it is only his second visit to Jerusalem, when Acts clearly states it is his third? If it is not the same visit, why does Acts at the second visit (11:30) say that Paul and Barnabas only went to the elders at Jerusalem? And what historical reconstruction makes the occurrence of two such similar happenings likely? Is the author of Revelation John the apostle? What is the relation between the Book of Jude and 2 Peter 2, and what implications does this have for authorship? Did the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism say "You are . . ." (Mark 1 and Luke 3) or "This is my beloved Son . . ." (Matt. 3)? Does Hebrews teach that a fall after baptism is unforgivable, as Luther maintained it did?⁴⁹ Was Luther correct in saying that most of what Hebrews built upon the apostolic foundation was gold, silver, and precious stones, so that the admixture of some wood, straw, and hay ought not to disturb its readers? Is not faith here made subject to the decisions of the historian? Are we not in danger of losing all?

Such a question deserves an answer. We

⁴⁹ "Preface to the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Word and Sacrament*, I, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 394.

must ask first whether the Scriptures themselves leave us any alternative. God is not a God of ideas, but of history. Here again words of Adolf Schlatter are a sober reminder:

God does not do His work of judgment and grace outside of man and so outside of or beyond history, but in and through history. Therefore the New Testament refuses to accept that revelation and history cannot be joined. That refusal also sets aside the assertion that historical investigation is a denial of revelation.

. . . Since we receive God's revelation through history and are formed by that, there can be no knowledge that is independent of a positive evaluation of history and that attempts to understand God's way of dealing with us apart from history.⁵⁰

In short, without historical investigation we have denied the God of the Bible who works in history, have turned His actions in history into mere intellectual concepts, and have lost the *extra nos* character of His actions, on which our salvation depends.

Some may say that this is well and good; but does this demand the critical study of history and the Scriptures? To this basic question the answer must be given that it is the Scriptures themselves that make critical judgments necessary. The Bible presents us with a great wealth of theological detail. We saw some of that wealth in the three creeds discussed earlier. But some decision has to be made as to the center, theologically speaking, from which that detail is to be understood and evaluated. Accepting the same canon and holding a view of verbal, plenary inspiration is not enough to found or assure unity of the church. How broadly differences can be

⁵⁰ Schlatter, pp. 60—61 (my translation).

found is clear to any discerning reader of *Christianity Today*, in whose pages millennialism, a false view of the sacraments, an emphasis on God's sovereignty that tends to negate His grace, and so on are at times found.

What is that center? To determine it requires a critical decision and application. Is the covenant the center of the Bible? Then dispensationalism may result. Both Paul and James argue from Gen. 15:6, but reach apparently opposite conclusions. Paul emphasizes that faith and grace are the center of theology, which demand that good works follow them (Rom. 4—5; 12:1-2); James seems to hold that the summons to good works is the center of theology and that faith is a sort of necessary preliminary. "We cannot dodge the question whether we consider Romans 4 as the real center of the Gospel and James 2 as a necessary correction in certain cases or do it the other way around."⁵¹ If the church is the center of theology, then we will begin with Ephesians, the Pastorals, Luke-Acts, and 2 Peter and interpret the Bible from that vantage point. If the doctrine of the Spirit and His freedom is the center, that is the belvedere from which we survey the terrain of Scripture — and we join many Pentecostal movements. The point is that some such decision is necessary — and inevitably suggests that something in the Bible is more basic than something else. That is a critical judgment.

For a Lutheran, of course, there is no hesitation at this point. He is convinced that the center of the Scriptures is Romans 4, the justification of the impious, which the Reformation captioned in its *solus*

⁵¹ Schweizer, "Scripture — Tradition — Modern Interpretation," *Neotestamentica*, p. 209.

Christus, sola gratia, sola fide, the Gospel. Theology for a Lutheran is the proper application of this center to the whole of the Scriptures. It is the mathematical point from which Scripture is to be understood.⁵²

This centrality of the Gospel was strongly emphasized by Luther. His description of the apostle as one who preaches and urges Christ and his use of this definition as a canonical criterion are well known.⁵³ For Luther the true theologian was the one who saw the redemptive acts of God: Remove Christ from the Scriptures and what is left to be found in them (*Tolle Christum e scripturis, quid amplius in illis invenies?*)⁵⁴

The man who deserves to be called a theologian is not the one who seeks to understand the invisible things of God through the things that are made (Rom. 1:22) but the one who understands that the visible things and the hind parts of God are seen through suffering and the cross.⁵⁵

⁵² A.-E. Buchrucker, "Die regula atque norma in der Theologie Luthers," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie*, 10 (1968), 131—69, esp. 149—56.

⁵³ "Prefaces to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude," *Luther's Works*, 35, 395—98. On the theological significance of these prefaces see W. G. Kümmel, "The Continuing Significance of Luther's Prefaces to the New Testament," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXXVII (1966), 573—81; Maurice E. Schild, "The Gospel as Prologue to Holy Scripture," *Lutheran Theological Journal*, 4 (1970), 49 to 56; Maurice E. Schild, *Abendländische Bible-vorreden bis zur Lutherbibel. Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationgeschichte*, XXXIX (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1970), 166—264.

⁵⁴ *De servo arbitrio*, *Weimarer Ausgabe* (WA), 18, 606, as cited in Hermann Sasse, "On the Doctrine De Scriptura Sacra," Letters addressed to Lutheran Pastors, No. 14, p. 26.

⁵⁵ Heidelberg Theses (1518), WA, 1, 361 to 363, as translated in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Lu-*

This Gospel was for Luther primarily oral! The New Testament existed to allow the oral proclamation to continue and to be preserved from error.⁵⁶ Luther especially in 1522 was struck by the fact that Jesus Himself did not write and drew inferences from this about the nature of the Gospel.⁵⁷ That the New Testament was written at all is a sign of man's evil:

For in the New Testament sermons were wont to take place orally with living words, bringing into speech and hearing what was formerly concealed in letters and secret vision. . . . The New Testament is nothing else but the exposition and revelation of the Old Testament. . . . Hence it is not the New Testament way, to write books about Christian doctrine, but there should be everywhere, without books, good, learned, spiritual zealous preachers, who should draw out the living word from the ancient Scriptures, and unceasingly exhort the people as the Apostles did. For before they wrote they had first preached to the people with actual words and converted them, and this was their real Apostolic and New Testament work. . . . But that it should be necessary to write books was a great loss and failure of the Spirit; it was the result of compulsion, and not the manner of the New Testament.⁵⁸

ther the Expositor (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), pp. 56 ff.

⁵⁶ Pelikan, pp. 68—70; Sasse, pp. 6—7 of Letter No. 16.

⁵⁷ "Ein Klein Unterricht was man in den Evangeliiis suchen und gewahren soll!" WA, 10, 1, 1; 17, 7-12, as cited in Gerhard Ebeling, "'Sola Scriptura' und das Problem der Tradition," *Wort Gottes und Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), p. 102; Eng. trans. "'Sola Scriptura' and Tradition," *The Word of God and Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p. 111.

⁵⁸ "Kirchenpostil, 1522: Evangelium am Tage der heiligen drei Könige," WA, 10, 1, 1;

The true Gospel is thus an oral Gospel. The New Testament is merely an aid to man's lack of the Spirit, a resource for his poverty.

This emphasis on the Gospel, on justification as the chief article, is not unique to Luther in Lutheranism. It is shared by the Confessions, as the essays adopted some years ago by commissioners of The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod make clear.⁵⁹ The Confessions define the church in terms of a preached or taught Gospel (*pure docetur*; AC VII), not in terms of an attitude to the New Testament. A similar critical attitude is to be seen in the distinction between the formal and material principles in orthodox Lutheran theologians. The Scriptures alone (*sola scriptura*) require a critical decision for their proper understanding.⁶⁰ This does not mean that one adopts a mere Christological-soteriological principle. That would underestimate, indeed misunderstand, the history of justification given in the Scriptures. As Gerhard Gloege has pointed out, to take justification as the center means that one must take seriously the entire life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the whole history of Israel, and the proclamation of the great act of justification.⁶¹ It is not a principle of reduction.

625, 19—627, 3. Cited in Ebeling, "Sola," p. 102; Eng. trans., pp. 111—12.

⁵⁹ See *Essays adopted by the Commissioners of The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod*, Nov. 22 and 23, 1964, and April 19 and 20, 1965, pp. 11 to 19.

⁶⁰ Ebeling, "Sola," p. 108; Eng. trans. pp. 117—18.

⁶¹ Gerhard Gloege, "Die Rechtfertigungslehre als hermeneutische Kategorie," *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, 89 (1964), 169—70.

This critical decision has far-reaching implications for the formulation and evaluation of hermeneutical presuppositions and approaches. It makes clear that we do not approach the Bible without presuppositions (*voransetzungslos*). We expect to hear God condemning us through the word of the Law and raising us up by the dynamic word of the Gospel, which comforts, offering the mercy and grace of God to transgressors, "the good and joyful message that God wills not to punish sins but to forgive them for Christ's sake" (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration V, 21). But this expectation does not make decisions in advance. To have this presupposition does not lead to making prejudgments. It does not determine the message of a particular passage or its literary form in advance. God is left in sovereign freedom to speak how He will, whether partially through the prophets or fully through His Son (Heb. 1:1-2). Interpretation is thus *vorurteilslos*.⁶² Only this lack of prior decisions guards against one's finding what he wishes in a text. But he can be certain that he will hear God speak:

In genuine listening to the Word God Himself is at work through the Holy Spirit, as He frees the hearer for the response of faith and obedience. Only when the biblical text is asked what it has to say to us as it addresses us today as God's Word is textual interpretation concerned with what is the central intention of the Word. Then texts truly come to say what they mean to say: This is God, the Lord who made all; this is His will; these are His promises; these are the deeds He has

⁶² See Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" *Existence and Faith* (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), pp. 289 ff.

done in history, and this is what He will be doing till all has reached its goal.⁶³

This decision that justification is the center of Scripture also illuminates the Reformation catchphrase *sola scriptura*. The *particula exclusiva* has as its direct antithesis the claim that there is some other source of justification than Jesus, God's agent, whose work and meaning is described and proclaimed alone in the Word of Scripture. No tradition, no sacramental church, no teaching office of the church can take the place of this source. *Sola scriptura* as a hermeneutical principle means that "Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm."⁶⁴ *Sola scriptura* is thus a principle of authority in theology. It is not in any sense a hermeneutical principle that determines *methods* in interpreting this single authority. It does not rule out the use of non-Biblical documents or history, archaeology, or reason as aids in the understanding of the text. It is not contrary to any theory of sources.⁶⁵ Scripture as *principium cognoscendi* does not rule out *Formgeschichte*. It is a solemn reminder that the normative Word is that which we have, not some other. We may never know the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus in Aramaic. No matter. It is not Torrey's or Jeremias' reconstruction of them that is authority, but the Greek text we have. (A similar point could be made about gospel harmonies.)

The centrality of justification also defines and limits the hermeneutical rule that

⁶³ Frör, pp. 53—54.

⁶⁴ Formula of Concord, Epitome, Rule and Norm 7; Solid Declaration 2, 8. Cf. Ebeling, "Sola," pp. 99, 119—20.

⁶⁵ This seems to make the critical strictures of Robert Preus unnecessary, p. 11.

Luther and the Reformation took over from pre-Reformation Biblical interpretation, *scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpretat*.⁶⁶ This means that the Scriptures are to be understood from justification. Romans 4 is a clear passage of Scripture, James 2:14 ff. is not. The passages that clearly proclaim Gospel are the touchstone of all interpretation. For that reason Luther preferred John to the Synoptics, Romans, Galatians, and 1 Peter to the rest of the epistles and Revelation.

For in them you do not find many works and miracles of Christ described, but you do find depicted in masterly fashion how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and salvation. This is the real nature of the gospel, as you have heard.

. . . For the works do not help me, but his words give life, as he himself says [John 6:63].⁶⁷

The clarity of Scripture is, in similar fashion, the clarity of the Gospel, as Article IV of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession says. There are unclear passages in the Bible (James 2), which require hard work to understand them.⁶⁸ Part of that work at least consists of relating such unclear passages to the Gospel. Where Luther could not make that relation, he took a harsh critical stance, for example, against Esther and James.⁶⁹ Yet

⁶⁶ Gloege, p. 169, with references to F. Kropatschek, *Das Schriftprinzip*.

⁶⁷ "Which are the true and noblest books of the New Testament," *Luther's Works*, 35, 362.

⁶⁸ See Luther, *De servo arbitrio*, WA, 7, 97, 5 f., 34 f.; 99, 1; 100, 18-24.

⁶⁹ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther und das Alte Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1948), pp. 158 to 165.

this stance did not weaken the authority of Scripture for him.

A Lutheran approach should take account of this centrality of the Gospel in its hermeneutics. When the historical sense of a passage has been found, one must go on to ask how that sense relates to the Gospel. The genealogy of Matthew yields magnificent Gospel. Indeed its schematized system (an acrostic on David's name?),⁷⁰ which drops names from the Old Testament, preaches the grace of God in a strong fashion.

Such an approach may help us to solve our questions about historical judgments. How is the Gospel affected if one says that Luke and Mark preserve the actual words from heaven at the baptism of Jesus, while Matthew's version is intended to make an aspect of the baptism clear: that Jesus Himself did not need baptism for forgiveness? This Matthean "change" preaches the Gospel. The decision as to the actual historical voice from heaven does not affect its validity. It would seem that we need to define inerrancy in terms that take such variation in the Gospels into account. To define inerrancy as a "correspondence of words to the facts described"⁷¹ leaves too little room for what the writers of the Bible actually did, however well it may seem to flow logically from a major premise.

Thereby we come to a claim that can be made for the historical study of the Scriptures. Such study teaches us to form our definitions of theological concepts in

⁷⁰ מלך is in Hebrew also a number, 4+6+4, that equals 14, the number of generations that Matthew says are in each of the three sections in his genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:17).

⁷¹ Preus, p. 181.

congruence with the facts of the texts. It reminds us also that there are facts and happenings that lie outside the realm of historical verification. Truth is not only that which a person can document historically. One, for example, cannot document by historical research the "on our behalf" dimension of Jesus' death, stated in 1 Cor. 15:3. It is no less true for that. This is a truth that cannot be grasped by any historical criticism.⁷² But faith grasps more than the mere fact of Jesus' death. It is thus independent of historical judgment at that point.

Indeed, one of the values of historical research is that it makes clear where the absurdity of faith lies (see 1 Cor. 1:18 ff.). As J. Gresham Machen once wrote, "The historical evidence for the resurrection amounted only to a probability."⁷³ But faith sees more than a probability. History can establish that men were sure that Jesus had risen from the dead and that their proclamation depended on it (see 1 Corinthians 15). Medical science today says otherwise. Men just do not rise from the dead. Historical study can also show that these first Christians were convinced that God raised Jesus (*ēgerthē*). After that faith must decide—and decide without

proofs.⁷⁴ To demand proofs may be to show lack of faith.

History is important. This entire essay has suggested that. We confess a historical Jesus, not a Christ idea. Were He to disappear, there would be no more Christian faith.⁷⁵ That is the point of the new quest of the historical Jesus. History does not create faith. That, as Paul said, is done by the Spirit through the proclamation and hearing of the Word. The fact that the Word witnesses and proclaims Jesus of Nazareth makes historical study necessary, that the Gospel in an ancient book might be the proclamation of the risen Lord of all time and history.

It is this attitude which we seek to inculcate into our students. One cannot predict what the theological topics of the next years will be, just as one could not have predicted the new quest. But we train men who are to do committed theological thinking and responsible preaching in an unpredictable world. New techniques, new antitheses, and new problems will characterize it. The task we face is to prepare men for it.

St. Louis, Mo.

⁷² Schweizer, "Bibelwissenschaft," pp. 141 to 142.

⁷³ Machen, p. 14.

⁷⁴ Harrisville, pp. 68—74.

⁷⁵ Maurice Goguel, "La critique et la foi," *La Probleme Biblique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), p. 13.