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The New Hermeneutic Versus the Old Hermeneutics in New Testament Interpretation

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THE NEW HERMENEUTIC IS A DEVELOPMENT in continental theology after World War II. It has developed from the hermeneutics of Rudolph Bultmann.¹ In order to understand the new hermeneutic it is necessary to look at the thought of Bultmann. In the 1920's Bultmann joined Barth in protesting against the old liberalism. When Barth published his famous *Römerbrief* (1919) Bultmann welcomed it as a breakthrough in Biblical interpretation. However, the friendship with Barth did not last too long because Barth did not employ the historical critical method even though he was not in principle opposed to its use. Bultmann had been thoroughly indoctrinated in critical methodology and his entire scholarly endeavor was shaped by its use. Bultmann took the position that nothing which contradicts science can be accepted even though clearly taught in the Bible. Bultmann's hermeneutics was thoroughly opposed to any form of supernaturalism, which in essence means cutting out the very heart of that which is distinctive about Biblical teaching, whether found in the Old or the New Testaments.² Any doctrine which goes against reason must therefore be rejected. Obviously miracles cannot be taken seriously. Doctrines like the incarnation, resurrection, ascension and a visible return of Christ are out of the question for any person who desires to be intellectually respectable. This rules out the concepts of prophecy and eschatology.

Over against the Old Testament Bultmann took a very negative attitude.³ Christians may entirely ignore the Old Testament or if they believe it should be used, then its value would be as law to show need for the Gospel. The Old Testament is a totally human document, at best preparing the way for Christianity. For Bultmann there is no such concept and reality as holy history or theology of history, only events of salvation. Since Bultmann espoused existentialism early in his life, even before coming into contact with the existentialist philosopher Heidegger, he rejects all precritical notions according to which man casts his religious experiences into the form of an external, worldly, historical event.⁴ For the Marburg professor this is a myth and the interpreter must get rid of the form that the myth has assumed and yet retain the religious intention of the myth.⁵ In this respect, Bultmann differs from the old liberalism of Harnack, one of Bultmann's teachers.

With Kierkegaard Bultmann held that the inner side of religious experience was existential in character; thus here also he departs from the earlier twentieth-century theological liberalism.⁶ The myth must be peeled off in order to find the existential meaning within it.

Dr. Ramm claims that Bultmann's "existentialism in turn leads him to the notion that the Word of God must be address which summons a man to decision either for or against the address. Hence the message of the New Testament as address is kerygma. This in turn must lead to powerful kerygmatic preaching from the sacred text."⁷ Bultmann's theological system is a synthesis of these different strands and enabled him to win away from Barth the theological leadership of European scholarship as found in Germany and Switzerland.⁸

The new hermeneutic has utilized all of Bultmann's contributions. The proponents of the new hermeneutic are convinced that Bultmann's heremeneutic constitutes a new breakthrough in relationship to the old hermeneutics, to which there can be no return.⁹ However, the new hermeneuticians believe that Bultmann did not realize all the implications that must follow if his positions are valid. Ernst Fuchs, Gerhard Ebeling and Gadamer are all convinced that the new hermeneutic is the answer to correct Biblical interpretation. Philosophically and theologically the new hermeneutic is more comprehensive than anything so far advocated. The older Biblical and sacred hermeneutics was too narrow in its understanding of the issues of the interpreting of a Biblical text.¹⁰ Earlier already, it is claimed, Schleiermacher and Dilthey had suggested that interpretation was far more comprehensive than traditionally conceived and practiced. Historical-philosophical interpretation was inadequate according to this new school of interpretation. Wilhelm Dilthey, greatly influenced by Hegel, claimed that the stream of history had to be experienced in one's self before *Verstehen* or comprehension could occur.¹¹ *Erklärung* was placed in opposition to mere *Verstehen*. It was the philosopher Heidegger who is supposed to have grasped this more comprehensive function of hermeneutics.

The new hermeneutic follows Heidegger in its claim that language itself is interpretation.¹² Fuchs, Ebeling and their followers also claim that language is existential in character. When an individual speaks he is said to be interpreting, thus the language act is hermeneutical. It is at this juncture where the problem arises for many students of the new hermeneutic for they note that here a radical shift occurs. Hermeneutics is no longer fundamentally the setting forth of principles by which the text of Scriptures is understood, but a profound investigation of the hermeneutical function of speech. In some instances the older hermeneutics is employed but there is much more involved in the interpretation of ancient Biblical texts.

The new heremeneuticians wish to eliminate the older psychologism and historicism that has characterized the older theological liberalism that has been found wanting by Bultmann and the post-Bultmannians.¹³ According to psychologism the text and events are interpreted in psychological terms; historicism on the other hand was guilty of explaining everything in terms of the law of causality. Both approaches were considered deficient because of the relativistic stance from which they spoke. By understanding the word ontologically the new hermeneutic believes it has avoided this dilemma.

The big problem in trying to understand the new hermeneutic is the manner in which its proponents use the vocable "word." It is difficult to grasp the various nuances of this word. Sometimes "word" seems to mean existential truth which reveals itself in speech. At other times it means speaking itself; yet at other times it refers to the existential truth contained in the text. Sometimes "word" is said to be the Word of God that breaks forth from a sermon. Some of the advocates of the new hermeneutic seem to imitate the procedure of the logical positivists who classify sentences into different categories. In reading the literature one notes that some sentences are *programmatic*, that is, they endeavor to state the structure of hermeneutics and understanding as such. Still other sentences are existential because they do not merely attempt to impart information but their purpose is to involve the reader in participation and profound communication. Still other sentences are *factual* or *scientific*, their purpose is to inform, whether it be on a popular level or a more theoretical (e.g., light is composed of rapidly moving photons). Other sentences are formal and only set forth relationships as in logic, mathematics, or grammar.

It is within this context of "word" that the new hermeneutic delineates its existential understanding of the Word of God. For Ebeling and Fuchs, the Word of God is more a movement than an idea. Within the text of Scripture God communicates existentially; the Word of God must be dug out of the text by exposition and exegesis of the text. The Word of God is received by the listener as such when he makes a decision and accepts it by faith. In describing the new hermeneutic Ramm wrote: "Existential considerations permeate each step of the procedure. For this reason the new hermeneutic is very critical of the so-called neutral, objective, scientific approach to exegesis as represented by Oscar Cullmann. No such exegesis is possible. The expositor must come to the text with existential understanding of religious matters (Vorverständnis), but he may not come with a prejudice (Vorurteil) as to what the text must say (as allegorical exegesis)."¹⁴

The new hermeneutic, following Bultmann, claims that faith cannot elaborate its content. Bultmann and the post-Bultmannians teach that the New Testament authors had true faith and that they are only witnesses to the Christ event. According to the new hermeneutic the New Testament writers were not exempt from error; in reporting the Christ event they introduced materials that cannot be accepted today. Bultmann insisted that the New Testament writings needed to be demythologized, that myth vitiated the reports of the information regarding the life of Christ. The foreign materials (foreign to the existential communication of the Word of God in the texts) must be criticized as to the contents (known as Sachkritik, content criticism), which is a characteristic of the new hermeneutic.

In this respect Barth is much better than Bultmann and his followers. While Barth does not hold to the old Protestant doctrine of inspiration as held by Calvin, Luther and other reformers,¹⁵ he does believe the content of the text. Barth, for example, believes in the existence of angels,¹⁶ while for the Bultmannians this simply

cannot be accepted in a scientific age. Since people do not rise from the dead once they have become deceased, Bultmann rejected the statement that Christ rose from the dead. Such a belief the modern interpreter may reject because it is contrary to the scientific understanding of the way nature functions. Content criticism became an essential element in the demythologization program of Bultmann as outlined in his famous essay of 1941. The content criticism of the new hermeneutic goes even beyond that of Bultmann's demythologization and is applied to the entire New Testament.

Bultmann had made much of the proclamation of the kerygma in preaching. The new hermeneuticians extend the kerygmatic proclamation of the New Testament to Christian preaching. According to this new school of interpretation the preacher must pose certain questions to the text, questions that man's existentialistic situation prescribe. The text in turn must ask questions of the interpreter. There must be an existential encounter with the text. Christian preaching, however, must also be relevant for not only the text but also the historical and cultural situation of the hearers determines the kerygmatic proclamation of the sermon. For the new hermeneuticians the essence of kerygmatic preaching is announcing God's love and forgiveness in Christ, and calls upon the hearer to decision of faith.

The new hermeneutic is not limited to theology but claims also the areas of philosophy and other branches of human knowledge. Ebeling, Fuchs, Gadamer, Funk claim that the new hermeneutic should also be the foundation for the reconstruction of philosophy, for a new program in epistemology. The liberal arts need also to be built upon the new foundation furnished by this new system of interpretation.

The new hermeneutic in theology does not merely mean some additional insight regarding the science of hermeneutics; it is completely revolutionary to the extent that its proponents claim it actually is a new theology.¹⁷

EVALUATION OF THE NEW HERMENEUTIC

What shall we say of this new hermeneutic? A very important question in theology is the significant question: What is the source of theology? What is the source for religious authority? There is no more important question! We have grown accustomed to answering that Scripture alone is the source and norm of all doctrine. We believe that the Bible is God's Word. On the pages of the Old and New Testaments God has seen fit to reveal to us what He would have us believe concerning Himself, concerning His nature, concerning His acts, concerning His plan of salvation. Being God's infallible Word the Bible is the source of Christian doctrine, the only source and norm. We call this the *Sola Scriptura* principle, a very important issue in the Reformation, in the confessional writings that followed, and in the writings of the seventeenth-century dogmatists.¹⁸ And very closely related with this *Sola Scriptura* principle is its corollary; namely, since there is no higher authority than God's Word itself, and since there is no additional revelation to which we

may appeal, the basic hermeneutical principal must be "let Scripture interpret Scripture," *scriptura scripturam interpretatur*.¹⁹

However, it is just at this point that the new hermeneutic moves away from the traditional position and goes in a completely different direction. It calls the traditional view which we have outlined as the static concept as opposed to the dynamic. In fact, Ernst Fuchs, Ott and others have gone so far as to label the traditional view "a manifestation of unfaith." If this objection were motivated from the concern that doctrine sometimes has been simply taught for doctrine's sake; if this criticism would be prompted because often doctrine has been intellectualized and not related to life, then we would be in hearty agreement with the criticism of the old theology as being static!

But a reading of the literature advocating the new hermeneutic will show that Ebeling, Fuchs, Gadamer, Robinson and others are not merely interested in making the applications in sermons more life-related, but they are saying that the Gospel message itself needs reformulating.²⁰ All those teachings of the Gospel message that modern man finds difficult to accept are to be trimmed away. It is actually a different Gospel that Ebeling, Fuchs, Ott, Bultmann, Robinson are proclaiming, in which all such external forms as faith in a pre-existent Jesus, the Virgin Birth, a physical resurrection of Jesus, a vicarious atonement, a second coming of Christ in the clouds must be removed.²¹ Even a hasty perusal of the new hermeneuticians will make it clear that it is this type of Gospel that men like Bultmann, Ebeling and Fuchs are convinced should be offered to our generation, a gospel that will not require them to accept the so-called mythological form of the New Testament message but only its basic contents, a gospel which will not require modern man to sacrifice his thinking! Bultmann has written:

Let us think simply of the newspapers. Have you ever read anywhere in them that political or social or economic events are performed by supernatural powers such as God, angels or demons? Such events are always ascribed to natural powers, or to good or bad will on the part of man, or to human wisdom or stupidity . . . therefore modern man acknowledges as reality only such phenomena or events as are comprehensible within the framework of the rational order of the universe. He does not acknowledge miracles because they do not fit into this lawful order. When a strange or miraculous accident occurs, he does not rest until he has found a rational cause.²²

Bultmann's conclusion, followed by all the new hermeneuticians, is to scrap the supernatural because modern man cannot accept it.

This means that for Bultmann, Ebeling, Fuchs, Robinson, and others the source of religious authority is Scripture and modern culture. According to these men the New Testament exegete or preacher is to begin with the New Testament kerygma, i.e. the faith of the early church, but then this faith must be shaped so that it becomes acceptable to modern culture and philosophy. When this new formulation and message are proclaimed and men respond to it,

then it is "language event" (so Ebeling); according to Fuchs it is "word event." They both agree on this, that when this reformulation is made and men respond, then the message is Word of God; this is what for Fuchs and Ebeling represents a dynamic word versus a static word.

For any Bible-believing Christian who follows the literal interpretation, this is quite different from the historic Protestant principle that Scripture is the only source and norm of Christian doctrine. It surely is not in harmony with the stance of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions. Many scholars, therefore, both in Europe and in America find the new hermeneutic objectionable on the ground that it changes the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. In 1952 at the assembly of the United Lutheran Church of Germany (the confessional grouping of Lutheran provincial churches) a pastoral letter condemned the theology of demythologizing as "false doctrine."²³ This confessional stand by the bishops was then followed by an officially sponsored volume in which a number of theologians explained their views in greater detail. In response Bultmann and his German followers retorted by claiming that the Lutheran bishops had betrayed the Reformation and attempted to show that Luther was on their side.

No one will accuse the American theologian Nels Ferre as being a conservative theologian. In his book, *Searchlights on Contemporary Theology*, the Vanderbilt University theologian wrote:

All attempts to claim that Bultmann has done away merely with an outworn cosmology, leaving the ontology of the Gospel undisturbed are stuff and non-sense.²⁴

Bultmann is not merely "bringing Christianity up-to-date by differentiating between outworn and indestructible events of the Christian faith. He is the pioneer of the most radical retranslation and transcalculation of faith itself into existential categories."²⁵

S. H. Ogden, who appears to be sympathetic to some extent with the new hermeneutic, is ready to admit that the new hermeneutic is a revival of liberalism. He writes:

We have aligned ourselves with that 'liberal' tradition in Protestant Christianity that counts among the great names in its history those of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Hermann, Harnack, and Troeltsch and many more recently Schweitzer and the early Barth and, in part at least, Bultmann.²⁶

Walter Marshall Horton, in his recent publication *Twentieth Century Christianity* classified Bultmann and his disciples as Post-Barthian Liberals. It is quite evident that the new hermeneuticians have retained a residue of the Liberalism of the 19th century.²⁷ Both liberals and conservatives are in agreement that the new hermeneutic is neo-Liberal.

In other respects the new hermeneutic is also deficient and in error when evaluated in the light of the interpretative principles used in the Lutheran Confessions. Thus in its restriction of its understanding of the supernatural it destroys prophecy and with that any real sig-

nificance of the Old Testament for the Christian Church, and thus is a return to the position of Marcion in the 2nd century. By its emphasis upon existentialism, most of the traditional dogmatic teachings are eliminated. By its interpretation that faith is purely a relationship between persons and need not have a doctrinal content, the whole foundation for Christian doctrine has been undermined.

Dr. K. Runia of Australia, in an essay delivered at the Annual Public Lecture of the Tyndale Fellowship of Australia, gave the following evaluation of Bultmann and the new hermeneutic:

In denying all this (the doctrine of the atonement) the new school of demythologizing performs one great destructive reduction of the Gospel. Not only are all aspects that are not susceptible of existential interpretation eliminated from the Bible, but those that are open to such an interpretation are reinterpreted in such a way and to such an extent that the real Gospel completely vanishes into the midst of essential self-analysis. David Cairns has put it very pointedly in these words: "The actual result is to bring before modern man a gospel without the Gospels, so that not without justification we may quote Mary Magdalene and say: 'They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.'"²⁸

The only teachings of the Apostles' Creed that have remained intact, according to Bultmann, are the assertions that he suffered, was crucified, died and was buried. The Virgin Birth, the conception caused by the Holy Spirit, Christ's resurrection, ascension and visible return are all denied.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE NEW HERMENEUTIC TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

While Bultmann and his followers primarily operated with the Books of the New Testament and developed an approach that has revolutionized the understanding of the New Testament writings, yet it should be acknowledged that in some respects Bultmann was indebted to critical Old Testament scholars for some of the basic hermeneutical approaches he used.

The rejection of the supernatural was not first promoted by Bultmann and his devotees, but dated back to the days of the Enlightenment, when the uniqueness of the Old Testament was questioned and much of its historical data was reinterpreted as myth and saga. In some respects the antisupernaturalism of Bultmann was already adopted by the negative literary critics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Old Testament criticism rejected the idea that the coming of the Messiah was foretold in many passages of the Old Testament, a stance the New Testament writers aver time and time again. This was also the position of Christ, who claimed that in His ministry He was fulfilling direct Messianic predictions about His person and work. Bultmann is simply following critical Old Testament scholars when he denies the existence of Messianic prophecy in the Old Testament. In fact, like critical Old Testament savants, Bultmann rejects prophecy per se, because that would be contrary to

what we know about the ability of men to anticipate and know the future and against the idea of a closed universe.

It was Hermann Gunkel, a German Old Testament scholar, who developed the hermeneutical approach known as form criticism (German: Formengeschichte). As early as 1901 Gunkel had set forth his ideas on Form Criticism in the introduction to his commentary on Genesis. The ideas explicated in this commentary denied to Genesis any historical and factual value, but argued that in the Genesis volume there were different kinds of sagas employed. The Sitz-im-Leben for the different types of literature had to be determined and then the interpreter had to try to understand how the smaller units of literary types had been embodied into cycles of tradition. Gunkel operated with myth, saga, legends. The character of the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges and I Samuel was changed by Gunkel's new hermeneutic. Books like Jonah, Esther and Daniel were relegated to the non-historical category by virtue of the fact that all three were said to represent a special type of literary genre, which forbade them, as was once the case, from being understood as recording true historical happenings.

In both Old and New Testament interpretation today the new hermeneutic is being employed. The result has been that there is being fostered in theological seminaries and school of religions an understanding of the Bible that has little resemblance to that once held by the various communions of Protestantism, by Roman Catholicism, and by Lutheranism as reflected in its confessional writings in *The Book of Concord* of 1580.

FOOTNOTES

1. Alan Richardson, *Religion in Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), pp. 90-91.
2. Carl Braaten, *New Directions in Theology Today*. Vol. II. *History and Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966).
3. Rudolf Bultmann, "The Significance of the Old Testament for the Christian Faith," in *The Old Testament and Christian Faith*, edited by Bernard W. Anderson (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), pp. 8-35.
4. Cf. Raymond F. Surburg, "Rudolf Bultmann and the Old Testament: His Approach and Interpretation," *The Springfielder*, 30:3-26, Winter, 1967.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
6. Herman Ridderbos, *Bultmann*. Translated by David H. Freeman (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1960), p. 9.
7. Bernhard Ramm, "The New Hermeneutics," in Ramm and Others, *Hermeneutics*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), p. 132.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Martin Scharlemann, "Hermeneutic(s)," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 39:614, October, 1968.
11. "Wilhelm Dilthey," in *An Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Vergilius Ferm (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), p. 228.
12. Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-88.
13. Ramm, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

15. Cf. Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957).
16. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III, 3, p. 369ff.
17. This will become apparent from reading the volume of Robert Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and the Word of God. The Problem of Language in The New Testament and Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), 305 pp.
18. W. H. T. Dau, "The Heritage of Lutheranism," in *What Are Lutherans Thinking*, edited by E. C. Fendt (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1947), pp. 14-15.
19. W. Arndt, "Hermeneutics," *Concordia Cyclopedia*, edited by Erwin L. Lueker (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), p. 463.
20. Cf. the following books dealing with the new hermeneutic:
 Gerhard Ebeling, "Hermeneutik," *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (third edition), III, 242-262.
 —————. *The Nature of Faith*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961.
 —————. *The Word and Faith*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963.
 Ernst Fuchs, *Hermeneutik*. Second edition. Bad Constanz: R. Muclerschen, 1958.
 James H. Robinson, and John B. Cobb, *The New Hermeneutic. New Frontiers in Theology*. Vol. II. New York: Harper & Row, 1964.
21. Cf. the essays by Elwein, Kinder, and Künneht which have been published in *Kerygma and History*, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Roy A. Harrisville (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962.)
22. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), pp. 37-38.
23. Ernst Kinder, *Ein Wort Lutherischer Theologie zur Entmythologisierung*, (München, 1952).
24. Nels Frederick Ferre, *Searchlights on Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 109.
25. *Ibid.*
26. S. H. Ogden, *Existence and Faith, Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*. Selected, translated and introduced by Shubert M. Ogden (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), cf. Introduction.
27. Cf. Howard W. Tepker, *The New Hermeneutic* (Springfield, Illinois: Concordia Seminary Print Shop, 1966), pp. 6-13.
28. K. Runia, "Dangerous Trends in Modern Theological Thought," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 25: 337-338, June, 1964.