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Some Contemporary Issues in New Testament Studies

In the spirit of the biblical injunction to seek the truth, Dr. Knudsen points out some implications for faith and scriptural scholarship of the new depth studies being conducted on the bases of the Christian faith. It is in the hope that believers will be more believing when their faith is tested and found *not* wanting that the *Journal* offers this stimulation in religious thought.

There are two terms in the subject which should be interpreted. The word "some" suggests that all New Testament issues will not be discussed in this paper, but that a selective process will be pursued in determining the subjects for consideration. The word "contemporary" sets in general the time element for selecting the issues involved although "contemporary" is a flexible term which may include a century or a tenth of a century depending on the areas of discussion and length of time to be covered. "Contemporary" includes those happenings which are coming into being during a period of time characterized as the present or modern. This paper will be concerned with issues which have largely emerged since the first world war to the present time, or a period of half a century.

The issues which have been selected for discussion should interest all serious students of the New Testament. The consideration will not be exhaustive, for such would demand many papers or even books, since each subject has been dealt with

extensively in articles as well as in books. It is not our purpose to discuss the pros and cons but rather to delineate briefly some areas of study. If a point of view is expressed it is more for clarification than for argumentation.

Form Criticism — Formgeschichte

Form criticism is a method of dealing with materials usually oral, but may include written which for some time were transmitted as oral tradition.

The form critics view the "gospels" as the work of the church scattered about the Mediterranean basin, which was involved in worship, missions, common work and polemical discussions. The stories about Jesus were told and retold many times before written into our gospels. It is thought that the needs of the community determined the choice of material which was eventually written down.

The form critic suggests that "folk memory", the vehicle of tradition, nor-

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mally operates with small units of incidents, stories or teaching. At times a limited number of types or units may be used into which is poured the content of each particular unit, which forms came to be known as "sits im leben" or the basis of transmitting and preserving tradition. This is the period known as pre-literary history. Experimentation with this approach to gospel study has given evidence of values, but it has also serious limitations which often outweigh the values.

The term *formgeschichte* was first used in 1882 by F. Overbeck and used by Martin Dibelius in 1919. This method of gospel study seeks to untangle the different layers of tradition and discover the growth of the "forms" utilized in gospel composition. Dr. Dibelius was interested in reconstructing the conditions under which forms were created, concentrating on the earliest tradition. This also included the question of "sits im leben" which was recognized in the early preaching of Christianity. Rudolf Bultmann was more radical and combined "form criticism" with literary criticism, in which the historical-philological method was also applied to the material under study. Bultmann was interested in distinguishing between Palestinian and Hellenistic tradition, but recognized that probably only from Palestinian sources could information come about Jesus. In some later works, such as "Jesus and the Word" and "New Testament Theology" he has indicated a willingness to find some historical incidents within the so-called legendary material. The conclusion seems to indicate that it is possible to write on the deeds and words of Jesus but not on the life and teaching of Jesus.

The synoptic material, the first three gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke, was classified and consider-

ed as "paradigmata" which was a short scene explaining the situation and usually including single sayings of Jesus, usually connected in the account. A second designation was "apopthegmata" which was concerned primarily with significant sayings of Jesus. Another category was "novellen" or the miracle stories, especially the healing miracles. A final category was called "legenda" which was concerned with the person of Jesus, but does not imply historical evaluation. Some writers had different designated categories but in essence the above categories include most of the forms.

In recent years certain tendencies have emerged in this study. (1) It has been transformed more into a history of the evangelist, giving consideration to theological perspectives so that the individual composer becomes better known. (2) The method of form criticism is now used on non-synoptic material in the New Testament in order to recognize fragments of catechetical instruction. (3) W. L. Knox has tried to correct the assumptions of form criticism that the earliest strata was oral and seeks to establish "tracts" or smaller collections of the sayings of Jesus. The tendency is to postulate a higher reliability to the synoptic gospels. This approach has been described as a variation of form criticism.¹

Demythologizing

The process of demythologizing the gospels emerged in Germany following World War II. Rudolf Bultmann contended that scientific man could not understand the unscientific language and ideas of the New Testament. The tripar-

¹*Peake's Commentary* (New edition edited by Matthew Black and H.H. Rowley), article on "Form Criticism of the New Testament," by E. Denkler, p. 683

tite world, heaven, hell and the world, is incomprehensible to modern man. "The cosmology of the New Testament is essentially mythical in character."² Bultmann wrote a paper in 1940 on "Demythologizing — existential interpretation" which brought the issue to the fore. Mythology is declared to present truth though in obsolete ways, sometimes as allegorical narrative. It is stated that modern man cannot believe in a world of spirits, spirits from above and from below, who influence him upon the earth. "Now that the forces and the laws of nature have been discovered, we can no longer believe in spirits, whether good or evil."³

The issues are posed in certain questions which indicate the involvement in the process. How is it possible to preserve the essence of the Christian faith, namely, "God acted without man in and through Jesus Christ," without demanding the acknowledgment of the mythological pattern of biblical presentation? (2) How retain the resurrection with the myth of the empty tomb as first fact? (3) How retain Jesus as the Son of God without the Virgin Birth? (4) How hold to the coming of the Kingdom of God without the extreme apocalyptic panorama? (5) How assert that Jesus Christ should be proclaimed as the crucified and risen Lord without the obstacle of the time-bound language of mythology? "The real purpose of the myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still existentially."⁴

Those questions and the attempt to answer them have presented to (Please turn to page 22)

²*Kerygma and Myth* - ed. by Hans Warner Barsch, p. 1.

³*Ibid.*, p. 4

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this school of thought a hermeneutical⁵ task, which is called existential interpretation. It is affirming that myth finds meaning in the self understanding of man, as man exists before God. This is man's self understanding in the midst of this world and of history. It is the interpreter's task to clarify the Kerygmatic content of myth by terminology or the use of symbols. The hermeneutical principle as interpreted by Dilthey and Collingwood sees man as a "knower" while Bultmann's anthropology considers man as "chooser" with the interpreter no longer on the balcony but on the stage struggling against false absolutes, uncritical authority and premature finalities.

Man throughout history has, through various means, sought to interpret his concept of God, of the world, and of himself in terms which could most clearly convey meaning. The common language used at any particular time does not necessarily reflect the scientific analysis of the actual situation. Even today in a highly scientific age we speak of the sun rising and setting, which any schoolboy knows is not scientific nor accurate but yet understood by all. We also talk about matter as lifeless while we are told that matter is energy. We speak of evil but shroud the fact in meaningless terms such as "force" or "social determinism" when we are reasonably certain that our answer is evasion rather than honest confrontation to our actual situation.

One other fact which needs to be explored in this context is that

⁵Hermeneutics is a method of interpretation which utilizes translations or "the transference of meaning from one language to another" as well as interpreting the author and his meaning in his works.

demythologizing dissolves the objective reality in subjectivity which hardly seems consistent with sound interpretation. The escape into subjectivity makes it possible to interpret existentially but not always historically. The material exploited for demythological purposes does not constitute the core of the Kerygma but rather relates at times to selected issues which may more properly find meaning in relationship to major events of the gospel accounts. Man's self understanding seems a rather thin thread upon which to posit an interpretative principle.⁶

Historical Event and Divine Revelation

The question of the relation between history and divine revelation, or the relation of history and witness to revelation, is a subject of deep interest and meaning. Christian theology does involve a doctrine of history as well as a doctrine of man or revelation. Christian origins should be subjected to the rigors of scientific historical methods, for history is a matter of both selection and interpretation; thus "bare fact" does not in itself have Christian significance. The inexplicables of history provide no solution but arouse additional questions. The gospel writer accepted both fact and interpretation asserting not only that Jesus rose from the dead but also that God raised Him from the dead. This assertion moves from fact which historical method can investigate to interpretation which requires theological method to ascertain meaning. This movement from fact, to the true meaning of the fact, thus enriches our understanding of the purpose of God in history, clarifying the relationship between history and theology.

⁶James L. Price, *Interpreting the New Testament*, p. 159-162. (Indebted to this section for help.)

Another point of interest is the variety of fact and interpretation presented by the different witnesses in the synoptic gospel. It becomes necessary to determine the core of each event and relate interpretative incidentals to the primary teaching. Eye-witness testimony is to be taken seriously whenever it unites to present God's saving action in history. The concern of biblical revelation is not primarily with the decisions of individuals but with the activity of God whereby man can become a member of His Kingdom. Historical events recorded in revelation by competent witnesses furnish a basis for the interpretation of man, the Christian community and the fulfillment of the divine purpose.

Buttman suggested that the meaning of history lay not in historical events but in man's understanding of his predicament. Ebeling asserts there is no such thing as objective or scientific history. It is affirmed that perhaps the most historical account is the one which is written in "the perspective of history" or in the light of the outcome of past events in more recent experience. So there is no absolute criterion whereby the historian judges the accuracy of the interpretation he has received.

[But] "Uninterpreted history is almost a meaningless abstraction."

Inspiration

It is generally assumed that religious consciousness cannot supply a satisfactory explanation for inspiration. The apostolic and prophetic concept of events was due to the activity of God in history. Considerable discussion has taken place concerning the function of the imagination in the receiving, articulation and communication of religious truth. Some believe religious truth can more adequately be expressed through (Please turn to page 23)

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forms of imagination — symbols, image, myth, etc. — than in propositional forms. It is difficult to accept the "plenary inspiration" of images. If the intellect is liable to err, there seems no good reason to assume that the imagination will not also err. If the Spirit plants "infallible" images in the mind, it should be reasonable to believe the same Spirit could plant "infallible sentences" in the mind. ⁷

The theory of verbal inspiration is seriously questioned, and by many considered untenable today, due in part to new manuscript discoveries, increased knowledge of transmission of text, and continuing historical studies. Inspiration is more concerned with truth than with words, with men more than with any mechanical concept of meaning. Worship is ascribed to God and not to a book, even though it is the most wonderful book in the world. God inspires man who under the guidance of the Holy Spirit speaks or writes inspired truth expressed in exact words of his selection.

In 1948 Dr. Austin Farrer in the Bampton lectures proposed a reinterpretation of the traditional conception of inspiration. Dr. Farrer suggested that "the propositions written down in Scriptures express the response of human witnesses to divine events, not by miraculous dictation". ⁸ This comes through images, great biblical images fulfilling the basic image structure of the human mind. Dr. Farrer holds that "Divine truth is supernaturally communicated to men in an act of inspired thinking

which falls into the shape of certain images. ⁹ Without these interpretative images there could be no supernatural revelation. These great images interpreted the events of Christ's life and ministry, and the events interpreted the images; and this interplay of these two is revelation. This process might lead to constant demythologizing of misleading and inadequate myths in order to develop more adequate images and myths. ¹⁰ There is more which needs to be thought and presented concerning the issue of inspiration than such a position suggests.

Quest for the Historical Jesus

The appearance of "Von Reimarus zu Wrede" translated into English as "The Quest of the Historical Jesus" (1910) by Albert Schweitzer brought a new and radical dimension to the study of the historical Jesus. The writer insisted on the eschatological features in the gospel and the thoroughly Jewish character of the setting. The historical Jesus practically disappeared and was essentially replaced by the "Christ myth."

Many scholars today accept the basic contention of "form criticism" that the early church modified the gospel tradition, and that missionary enterprise rather than biography governed the assembling of the stories used in the gospels. The possibility of "form criticism" being able accurately to determine the reliability of particular incidents on the basis of categories is questioned by some writers on New Testament studies. C. H. Dodd, T. W. Manson and Vincent Taylor contend for the substantial historical reliability of the gospels on critical grounds. ¹¹

The problems today seems to revolve around the question as to

the possibility of making a distinction between Jesus on the one hand and the stories of His life as found in the gospels on the other. There are two opinions: first, accept or reject the portrait of the gospels; and second, recover the image of Jesus even though it may not correspond to all the particulars of the gospels. It is thought by some that the Christ as interpreted by the church is the only possible portrait of Jesus. Since God chose to reveal Himself in Jesus of Nazareth, it is reasonable to ask whether what we know about him fulfills the claims made for this fulfillment.

The ancient world found it difficult to construct a life of Jesus due to its concept of matter. The modern quest has difficulties with the human Jesus designated as Christ. The range of approach today moves from complete Deity to complete humanity, separate and not fused in the same person. Albert Schweitzer sought for an answer in an eschatological interpretation, while C. H. Dodd has presented Jesus as the fulfillment of eschatology or "realized eschatology." Modern attempts at reconstruction range from the sentimental, the socialist, the paranoiac, the devotional and the completely unknown and unknowable. Every point of view in history and philosophy has projected some concept of Jesus, relevant or irrelevant, creative or created.

The new quest seeks to distinguish between the statement of an event and the reality of the event itself. The interest which faith and preaching had in Jesus determined the nature of tradition. Some of the new developments are interesting and exciting. Ernest Kasemann indicated that Jesus spoke of his mission rather than his person, and the church correctly interpreted his intention, his messiahship. Ernest Fuchs suggests that the actions of Jesus, his deeds, draw God near to man. Gun-

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⁷Cambridge History of the Bible - ed. by S. L. Greenslade, p. 334

⁸Austin Farrer, "A Glass of Vision," Lecture III quoted from *The Cambridge History of the Bible* ed. by S. S. Greenslade.

⁹Ibid., p. 334.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 333-335.

¹¹Ibid., p. 292.

ther Bornkamm finds in the recorded words of Jesus the immediacy of his historical challenge. "Because the earthly Jesus is for the church at the same time the Risen Lord, his word takes on, in the tradition, the feature of the present."¹² Bornkamm further states "although the gospels do not speak of the history of Jesus in the way of reproducing the course of his career in all its happenings and stages, in its manner and outer development, nevertheless they do speak of history occurrence and event".¹³ Alan Richardson comments, "The Christian Kerygma was firmly rooted in the life and works of Jesus Christ."

The new quest differs from the old in its concept of history. The new utilizes facts and causes as well as the externals of events which may be considered as the existential approach to history. This approach is primarily interested in the "inside of events." Such an approach calls for a re-evaluation of sources and relationship of history to Kerygma.

There are indications that this renewed reconstruction in the study of Jesus and the gospels will add meaning both to Jesus and the gospels for the church. The reconstructed understanding of Jesus will incorporate the results of contemporary research, the new understanding of history, the depth of devotion to truth and the reality of Christian experience. This possibility of the new insights brought forth by the new quest is both exciting and challenging to the best New Testament scholars as well as to the Christian church.

¹²Gunther Bornkamm, "Jesus of Nazareth", p. 17.

¹³Ibid., pp. 24-25

Typological interpretation of the New Testament suggests that the coming of Jesus and the Church were foreshadowed in persons and events in the Old Testament. Before the rise of critical historical study of the Old and New Testament the typological interpretation of the Ancient Fathers had been neglected for a mechanistic concept of predicative elements in the Old Testament. The historical method essentially destroyed the prophetic argument especially in its traditional form.

In the twentieth century it became evident to some that a powerful apologetic may be used on the fulfillment of the Old Testament in the New. Such fulfillment is of types or images rather than of literal fulfillment of predictions. Images in the Old Testament — king, priest, prophet, messiah, servant, and others are re-born in the New Testament. These are part of Israel's history but fulfill the longings and desires of all nations. Some images were of persons or great situations which were instruments in the Old Testament of divine revelation analogous to some events of the New Testament drama. It is held that the gospel tradition took the form which became the theological-typological interest of the apostolic witnesses. There is always the danger that typology may degenerate into allegory and uncontrolled subjectivism. It appears unrealistic to assume that almost every verse in the Old Testament finds fulfillment in the New Testament. Jesus uttered a profound truth which ought to be considered in evaluating this position, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I came not to abolish them but to fulfill them (Mt. 5:17)." The question is pointedly, did he fulfill the law and the prophets? The answer will determine the interest or value ascribed to typology.

The issue available for serious New Testament study today are numerous and intellectually as well as spiritually challenging. It can be said no more that biblical studies are dull and uninteresting, for recent research, new discoveries and the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit into truth beckon the devout scholar to continually pursue "the Life", the most wonderful life ever lived upon earth, in order to make Him known to our generation.

(N.B. This paper lacks footnotes due largely to the limitation of material at hand. Credit has been given wherever possible.)