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The Hermeneutical Problem and Preaching

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One is sometimes tempted to the thought that the theologian's work is often carried out not in obedience to the Great Commission of Matt. 28:19 f.: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations . . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you," but rather in compliance with an unknown saying which might run: "Go ye therefore and discuss with all nations, . . . and make into problems whatsoever I have commanded you." It is thus with some diffidence that I have left the word "problem" in the heading of this paper. But I do it for the following reason. One does not have to do much reading in the Biblical disciplines to realize that hermeneutics has at present gained a position of central importance in this field, as in the whole study of theology. We can go so far as to say that the whole present scholarly discussion in New and Old Testament theology reflects an interest in the hermeneutical problem.

I. WHAT IS "HERMENEUTICS"?

From the outset it must be said that part of the modern hermeneutical problem lies in just this: the difficulty of settling on one commonly accepted definition of hermeneutics! The difficulty is again experienced when we come to the question of the relationship of hermeneutics to exegesis.

The Greek verb *hermeneuein* can be translated in three ways: to express, to interpret or explain, to translate. In each case one idea is uppermost. The basic root meaning can be rendered with "to transmit understanding", "to bring to understanding", whether it be through free speech, the interpretation of something already spoken, or interpretation of a foreign tongue through translation.[1] Etymologically *hermeneuein* can hardly be differentiated from *exegeisthai,* which can also mean "express" or "expound." Where then lies the distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics?

There was a time when the latter term, when applied to Biblical theology, simply meant the science which dealt with the techniques and tools of Scriptural exegesis. Hermeneutics, together with isagogics, thus took its place as an introductory discipline to the study of exegesis itself. The present understanding of hermeneutics is, however, much wider. To put it as simply as possible, hermeneutics has to do with the problem of understanding. It is the methodology of understanding. As such it is a discipline not limited to theology with its five main fields. The hermeneutical problem applies equally to psychology, phi-

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[1] Cf. G. Ebeling "Hermeneutik," in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart,* Vol. 3, p. 243.

losophy, literature, and history. In the realm of philosophy this is true not only of the existentialism of Heidegger, Jaspers, and Kamlah but also of the "school" of logical positivism with its quest not for eternal truths but for meaning. Full understanding is possible only on the basis of logical statements which have a clear meaning.[2]

Within the sphere of Biblical interpretation the distinction between hermeneutics and exegesis can perhaps best be put as follows:

The task of exegesis is to ascertain exactly what the author wished to say in the precise historical situation in which he was, in which he was himself translating the message of the Gospel. The hermeneutical question already begins with the task of translating the original words of the text, of understanding what they meant then, but it is really felt only when the exegetical task is completed and we are left with the task of understanding this text for ourselves, of understanding its message in our precise historical situation.

The hermeneutical problem thus involves not only our understanding of the original text, but also the problem of bridging the historical time-distance between the original text and that which it proclaims and ourselves. How is one to bridge the distance between God's once-for-all-time action in Christ and my own situation? Hermeneutics first deals with this question, that of the *appropriation* of the saving event in Christ. It then concerns the problem of *communicating* the relevance of this event, and the whole subject of preaching.

[2] See the collection of articles in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology,* ed. by Flew and MacIntyre, 1955.

II. The Necessity of Biblical Hermeneutics

If there is one thing which the church today needs more than anything else, it is clarity on the doctrine of the Word. It is not accidental that the dissension and confusion with regard to this doctrine is only to be matched by the methodological confusion in the exegetical approach to Scripture and in hermeneutical work. If we have a clear teaching on the nature and purpose of the Word, we must also have clearly defined principles of understanding and interpretation.

It is also not by coincidence that the Reformation with its concentration on the Word of God, and especially on the *viva vox Dei,* conferred upon the question of hermeneutics a significance it had never attained before in the history of the church. The Roman Catholic view of tradition was actually an answer in itself to the hermeneutical problem, and this in two ways. In the first place, it held that revelation as testified in Scripture cannot be correctly understood without the apostolic tradition preserved intact in the church. The problem of understanding is solved also by the fact that this tradition is itself interpretive in character. This also means that the second problem of hermeneutics is also solved, the question of the present actualization of past revelation. This is effected by means of the binding force of the doctrinal and moral teaching derived from Scripture and realized in the present life of the church. This takes place in the following ways:

(a) Specific instructions of Jesus to His disciples (the so-called *consilia evangelica*) are again made applicable in the present situation by reconstruct-

ing the past historical situation. This takes place above all in the system of monasticism, and is called by Ebeling "the method of *actualization by imitative historicizing.*" [3]

(b) In the case of the doctrinal teachings of the Roman Church we also find an *actualization by contemplative historicizing*. The gap between past and present is bridged by the believer transposing himself into the past, thereby becoming contemporaneous with it. This is done by contemplation and meditation not only of the event itself, or of a reported saying, but also of the experience of those originally concerned. This can also take place by means of re-presentation of the past in mimes and passion plays, in the contemplation of relics, or in pilgrimages to the sites of sacred history. In each case what is aimed at is a reappropriation of the past event of salvation.

(c) Another method, that of *mystical actualization,* is of course not limited to the Roman confession. In this case direct contact with reality is provided by immediate, that is, non-mediated experience, so that the time factor is excluded altogether. The encounter takes place in a timeless eternity; past and future become present.

(d) *Relics* themselves have special hermeneutic significance. They not only stimulate a contemplative actualization of the past. In them, in a special sense, the unique past event of revelation is itself present.

(e) Access to the past via the Word alone is further obviated by the role of the *saints*. The whole history of salvation is present in its outstanding representatives, the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and saints, including Mary, the Queen of Heaven. The church gains access to the past not merely by remembering them as figures of the past but by bringing them into the present. The church can thus turn to them as immediate contemporaries — in prayer.

(f) But all of these methods are of secondary consideration when compared with the importance of the *sacramental actualization* of the past in the sacrifice of the mass. Here appropriation takes place not only in the repeated sacrifice of the mass (the believer need only be present!), but also in the reservation and adoration of the host *extra usum sacramenti.* Here it is not Word and Sacrament, neither is it a case of Word in the Sacrament. "The real actualization of the event of revelation does not at all take place *via* scripture and its exposition in the sermon, but solely *via* the Sacrament." This has led to the neglect of the sermon in the mass since this form of sacramental actualization does away with the hermeneutical problem.

(g) To complete the picture, the final guarantee of the present possession of the past is given through the institution of the church, in the unbroken episcopal succession with the infallible teaching office of the papacy. Ebeling concludes: "The perfect tense of the event of salvation is swallowed up by the continual present of the Church." [4]

The answer of the reformers to all these issues, salvation by faith alone, is at the same time the enunciation of a central her-

[3] For this and the following points see G. Ebeling, "The Significance of the Critical Historical Method," *Word and Faith (Wort und Glaube),* 1963, pp. 32 ff.

[4] Ebeling, p. 35.

meneutic principle. The *sola fide* is not only said against any work-righteousness but also against any false actualization of the past Christ-event. To this there corresponds the *solus Christus,* and Luther's insistence on the primacy of *was Christum treibet.* This naturally includes the third basic hermeneutic principle, the clear *distinction between Law and Gospel.*

All this means that the past revelation in Christ can only be presented, that is, made present or actualized, through the Word, thus the *sola scriptura.* The appropriation of Christ and His benefits takes place in every case through the Word alone. Added to this central hermeneutical principle we find Luther's supporting contention that Scripture is its own interpreter, *sui ipsius interpres.*[5] This is not an additional hermeneutic principle, nor is it to be understood in a Biblicistic sense. It is rather an explication of the *sola scriptura,* as is also his insistence on the *perspicuitas* and *claritas* of Scripture, and on the primacy of the *sensus literalis* over against the traditional allegorical, tropological, and anagogical interpretations of Scripture.

It is natural then that the modern evangelical discussion on hermeneutics takes as its starting point the theology of the Word and our understanding of this Word, especially in preaching.

Forgetting for the moment the Roman Catholic extreme as already outlined, it might still perhaps be objected that the very perspicuity of the Word does away with the need for detailed exegesis, for interpretation as a whole. We have already noted that the hermeneutic problem sets in not only with our understanding the original text but also with the search for the relevance of the message of the text for our present historical situation. This is no problem for those who have, at the other extreme, a Biblicistic-fundamentalist view of Scripture, since here every single word is absolutized within the Word of God. It thereby loses its nature as a word spoken at a certain point of history in a not necessarily repeated or repeatable situation. It results in a concentration on the *verba* to the detriment of the *res* which the words seek to express. It results, for example, in the false emphasis on words of prophecy, especially on the historically not so clear words of Daniel and Revelation, as in our modern sects! But this procedure is certainly not only sectarian; it is also found in some denominational textbooks which presuppose "that the Bible is a compendium of abstract and eternally valid doctrinal statements, conditioned in no way by their original historical context." [6]

These errors, plus the Lutheran insistence on the *sola scriptura* and the emphasis on the preached Word of God as the *viva vox Dei* make the study of hermeneutics imperative also for us. As long as our theology is Scriptural, as long as we see the actualization of the past work of salvation only as appropriated by faith through the preaching of the Word, we must be clear in our thinking on, and our method of, interpretation.

III. The Recent History of the Hermeneutic Problem in New Testament Research

What has so far been said still does not show how the hermeneutical problem —

[5] In *Assertio omnium articulorum,* 1520, WA 7, 96 ff.

[6] Robert H. Smith, "Creation, Ethics, and Hermeneutics," *The Lutheran Scholar,* Vol. XXII, July 1965, p. 68.

one could say dilemma or confusion — has today assumed such important proportions. In presenting this short survey of some recent developments in Biblical research I consciously restrict myself to the New Testament field. While research into the New and Old Testaments has run very parallel, the Old Testament has its own peculiar hermeneutic problems. We may simply refer to the discussion which has arisen over Von Rad's "Old Testament Theology" and his typological method of interpretation, a discussion which has led to his being called the Bultmann of Old Testament study and which has produced the very interesting collection of essays by various authors in *Probleme alttestamentlicher Hermeneutik,* edited by Westermann.

The mere mention of the rise of the historical-critical method in Biblical research should be enough to set the stage for what here follows. The old liberal search for the historical Jesus ended in failure with the realization that it is impossible to distill from the Gospel accounts a purely objective, historical biography of Jesus of Nazareth on which faith might be based. This realization was further strengthened by the findings of the *formgeschichtliche Methode.* (Perhaps form analysis would be a better translation than the usual English "form-criticism.") Despite the varieties of approach shown in the basic form-critical work,[7] and despite the methodological confusion it has since caused,[8] this method of investigation into the Gospel has come to one central conclusion which has found general acceptance: the synoptic evangelists were not so much free authors as collectors or collators of originally isolated pieces of tradition which were not only preserved by the early church but which were also formed and formulated according to the needs of the church, whether in its preaching, teaching, its apologetics, or whatever the need may have been. That is, the original pericopes arose out of the situation of the early church and thus reflect its thinking and theology.

However, the last decade has witnessed a new development in synoptic research which has vital significance for the hermeneutical problem. The findings of form-criticism have been supplemented, or rather corrected, by the *redaktionsgeschichtliche Methode* (redactional criticism or analysis). This new approach to the gospels has shown what should have been remarked all along: that the Evangelists were more than mere collators of tradition, that as redactors or editors of tradition they were in their own right theologians treating the traditional material handed down to them, whether in oral or written form, according to the theological aims which they were pursuing. Their gospels are also a preaching of the Gospel in a specific his-

[7] Cf. K. L. Schmidt, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu,* 1919; but especially M. Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums,* 1919 (English title: *From Tradition to Gospel*); R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition,* 1922 (English title: *The History of the Synoptic Tradition,* 1962); also M. Albertz, *Die synoptischen Streitgespräche,* 1921; G. Bertram, *Die Leidensgeschichte Jesu und der Christuskult,* 1922, in English also see V. Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition,* 4. ed., 1957; B. E. Redlich, *Form Criticism, its Value and Limitations,* 1939; and F. C. Grant, *The Growth of the Gospels,* 1933. For the best critique of the form critical method, see E. Fascher, *Die formgeschichtliche Methode,* 1924.

[8] A brief look into Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch* with its legion of approaches, methods, and presuppositions is enough to prove this statement!

torical situation.[9] This line of development can also be followed up in respect to the Book of Acts and the epistles of the New Testament. The History of Religions school, at its peak at the beginning of the century and strong in the following two decades, tended to bring into discredit much of the contents of these books, seeing dependence on Hellenism here, on Gnosticism there, at another point dependence on the oriental mystery religions or on Hellenistic or Palestinian Judaism.

Here, too, the situation has changed. The question now is not: Where did Paul get this thought? From Hellenism or Judaism? The final question is rather: In what way did Paul appropriate the terminology and thought forms of his day and its culture to serve the preaching of the cross? The question thus has a completely different aim, a hermeneutical aim, the better understanding of the theology of the author whether Paul, Peter, John, or James, the better understanding of their preaching of the cross.

Now the relevance of all this for hermeneutics should be quite clear.

(1) In the first place we have impressed upon us once more that the Word of God is kerygma. It is proclamation. It is not a dogmatic textbook, although it contains dogma; it is not a textbook on ancient law or science, although it reflects and contains both. It wants to be and is, in its entirety, the preaching of the cross (1 Cor. 1: 18). Our preaching of the cross is based on the text, which is already the preaching of the Christ-event.

(2) In the second place our understanding of the original apostolic kerygma will be the greater as we take into consideration the first situation, the first *Sitz im Leben,* in which the "text" was proclaimed, to the extent that this can be recovered. At times several situations may be implied in the text: the situation in which the word was spoken by Jesus, the situation in which it was spoken in the primitive church, and the situation in which the evangelist spoke when he included this word in his entire gospel.

These in brief are the presuppositions on which the present hermeneutical question rests. But the modern approach must still be described and illustrated. We do best to begin with a brief mention of the rise of the new kerygmatic theology beginning with Barth and Bultmann.

The Hermeneutics of Bultmann, Ebeling, and Fuchs

We have seen that the modern discussion on hermeneutics issues from the basic understanding of the Word of God as living kerygma. This was the protest of the dialectical school of theology against the relativism and historism of the religio-historical school: Faith is not to be built up on a picture of Jesus which is based upon a critical reconstruction of the historical Jesus as He was. This is also the protest of Barth in his epoch-making commentary on Romans — and long before him, of Martin Kähler in his *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche biblische*

[9] For the standard redaction-critical works on the three Synoptics see H. Conzelmann, *Die Mitte der Zeit,* 2d ed., 1957 (English title: *The Theology of Saint Luke,* 1960); W. Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus,* 1959; and G. Bornkamm — G. Barth — H. J. Held, *Überlieferung und Auslegung im Matthäusevangelium,* 1960 (English title: *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew,* 1963).

Christus. The famous introductions to Barth's commentary in its various editions (first printed in 1918) are themselves hermeneutical essays. They point back to the confrontation character of the Word. Man is not so much the questioner as he is the one whose existence is placed under question by God and who is called to decision. A dispassionate and objective attitude to the Word is a denial of its very nature and purpose.

Bultmann, who with Barth, Brunner, Gogarten, and Thurneysen formed the first core of this protesting group, has since gone his own way in developing a theology which is nothing more than a hermeneutics of the New Testament. His name of course first recalls the launching of the demythologization program with his manifesto *New Testament and Mythology.*[10] Here it must be added that much criticism of Bultmann does not touch him since it does not see the presuppositions in this essay, nor the purpose of his program. In his own words Bultmann's aim is *die Schrift zum Reden bringen . . . als eine in die Gegenwart, in die gegenwärtige Existenz redende Macht.* We could paraphrase as follows: To allow the written Word to become the spoken Word as a power which speaks into the present, to present existence.[11] The Word is understood only insofar as it speaks to me directly in the terms of my existence, in turn illuminating my existence.

Bultmann's radical critical work has led him to the point of extreme agnosticism on the question of the historicity of the events which the New Testament records.[12] The point is not so much that he refuses to believe in the miracles, the resurrection of Jesus, or the other supernatural events described in the New Testament, but rather that he is not at all interested in establishing these events as objectively historical. Faith, he protests, here claiming to follow in the footsteps of Luther, cannot be based on objectively verifiable historical facts. This would be to provide props to faith, would amount also to a work-righteousness. No, the message of the Bible comes to us only in the form of *Anrede,* in the form of an appeal and challenge whose content cannot be objectified.

It is thus not difficult to see how Bultmann's hermeneutic approach leads to a new understanding of history. History is for him not established historical fact (*Historie*) but rather that which applies to and concerns me in my present existence (*Geschichte*). Even the objective historical facts which the New Testament history seems to present, the *bruta facta,* are for Bultmann irrelevant for Christian faith. History is for him "not the unrecallable march of events leading on to the end of time, in whose course God's dealings in salvation began at a particular time and lead on to a particular temporal fulfilment. On the contrary, 'history' is every meeting point, in the Now, through which I am asked whether I will deliver myself up, and thus open myself for the future which conceals itself in the meeting point of the Now. In this way the *recurring* 'moment

[10] First presented in lecture form in the summer of 1941.

[11] *Glauben und Verstehen,* II, p. 233. All the essays in the three volumes of *Glauben und Verstehen* are studies on the theme of hermeneutics and on the relationship between faith and understanding.

[12] Best illustrated in his *New Testament Theology* and the booklet *Jesus* (English title: *Jesus and the Word,* Fontana, paperback, 1958).

of decision' takes the place of the definiteness of the *once-for-all* historical action of God."[13]

Bultmann's radical insistence on the *Nichtobjektivierbarkeit* or the *Nichtgegenständlichkeit* of the message or content of Scripture arises from his conception of the Word as *Anrede* only, as it is addressed to man and his existence. Faith, therefore, cannot be identified with a past picture of the world with angels, miracles, a three-tiered universe, with heaven and hell, that is, with mythological language. This must in turn be demythologized in terms of man's existence. Thus for Bultmann every theological statement must also be an anthropological statement if it is to be legitimate. There is no religious objective truth which does not speak to man in terms of the meaning and purpose of his existence, existence being in turn analyzed and characterized in terms of Heidegger's *Existenzphilosophie.*

The central problem with Bultmann is this — and here the old dedogmatizing tradition of liberal theology has not been completely shaken off: theology has here become anthropology. *"Will man von Gott reden, so muss man offenbar von sich selbst reden."* Again he says: *"Wenn gefragt wird, wie ein Reden von Gott möglich sein kann, so muss geantwortet werden: Nur als ein Reden von uns."*[14] Faith as the work of God — on this Bultmann still insists — is based not on a new picture of God but on the *neues Selbstverständnis* (new understanding of self) in the light of kerygma, an understanding which arises from the existential confrontation with the Word. Bultmann's hermeneutics is essentially anthropological in orientation, since understanding is possible only in terms of the existence in which I live.

Apart from the criticism already implied in the above brief review, the following points must be directed against Bultmann.

(1) First it must be said that the problem of the actualization, or appropriation, of the past has still not been overcome. We should even go so far as to say that the gap between the past history of salvation in Christ — which for Bultmann is practically irrelevant — and myself in the present is actually widened. What then does Jesus Christ, His suffering and death, mean for me if that is all to be reduced to the mere *Dass* of the Jesus of History?

(2) Does not Bultmann, in order to escape the old liberal Ritschlian concept of atonement as a new objective picture of God, fall into the other trap of making man the questioner? It would seem to me that he turns "Adam, where art thou?" which comes to us from God, into "Man, how do you understand yourself?"

(3) Can I approach God's Word with an understanding of myself apart from having already heard God's verdict on my existence? Is a non-Scriptural analysis of human existence a legitimate tool towards the understanding of God's Word spoken to me? Or must I not be still and listen and be told where I stand? Can understanding take place exclusively on the basis of the existence which I know, or is there not a revelation which is "unearthly"?

(4) Finally, if the New Testament is to be understood as the explication of

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[13] W. G. Kümmel, *Man in the New Testament,* 1963, who cites Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen,* II, 71.

[14] *Glaube und Verstehen,* I, 28 and 33.

> the meaning of the Cross and Resurrection in kerygmatic form, and if this proclamation itself depends on the very historicity of this salvation event — whether this can be objectifiably verified or not — is not the present preaching of the Cross bound to the New Testament's own understanding of history? Can I make my analysis of human existence the final yardstick for the relevance of the Word of God? If I do this, am I not returning to the old human *hybris,* the prideful position of man who dares to stand in judgment over God's Word?

To continue our survey, the present discussion on hermeneutics in the New Testament field is dominated by *Gerhard Ebeling* and *Ernst Fuchs,* who have critically carried on where Bultmann has left off. To put their case as briefly as possible, we may outline as follows. In order to bridge the gap between Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, or the gap between the written Word as the record of God's action in Christ and the present preaching of this event as illuminating my existence, they have concentrated on an examination of the nature of speech or language. Here again the aim is to let the message of the New Testament "come to expression," or express itself.

In an important essay entitled *Word of God and Hermeneutics*[15] Ebeling outlines his position which can be characterized by means of two technical terms: *der hermeneutische Zirkel* (the hermeneutical circle) and *Wortgeschehen* (word-event). The argument goes, briefly, as follows. The actualization of the past occurs only through the Word. The *sola scriptura* must be retained as the central hermeneutical principle. But the written Word must be distinguished from the spoken Word, the proclaimed Word of God which speaks directly to present man. Hermeneutics can thus also be called the theory of doctrine of the Word of God.[16] Words themselves possess only symbolical character. The problem imposed by speech is not so much that of understanding words as of transmitting understanding through words. A word therefore (here he refers to the Hebrew *dabar*) is an event, and it is that only between men because words, by transmitting understanding, illuminate existence.

The proclamation of the church as the preaching of Christ is therefore in itself the actualization of the past. The preaching of the Cross and Resurrection is not the proclamation of what God did in the past but the opening up of the possibility that this can happen in the present for the believer. The language event which takes place in preaching becomes itself the salvation-event. Thus the past historical event is absorbed or subsumed into the present proclamation of the Word as the living challenge of God to faith, the surrender of self to God.

But this challenge, as in Bultmann, is and must be in terms of man's existence. What must be understood is not only the text of Scripture but also man's existence. Again, as in Bultmann, the *Woraufhin der Befragung* (the question with which man approaches the Word) is central. This implies the hermeneutical circle. We ap-

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[15] *Word and Faith,* pp. 305 ff.

[16] Ibid., p. 323. Also see E. Fuchs, *Hermeneutik,* 2d ed., 1958, and the essays in *Studies of the Historical Jesus,* 1964, especially the two entitled "Translation and Proclamation" and "What is Language-event?"

proach the Word with an understanding of ourselves which is then modified or corrected, itself interpreted by the Word, giving us a new understanding of ourselves *(Selbstverständnis)*. "Hermeneutics, in order to be an aid to interpretation, must itself be interpretation," as Ebeling says in his essay.

How does the salvation-event take place in the word-event in proclamation? The text, he says, seeks to serve proclamation. But "if the word-character of God's Word is taken strictly, then it is absurd to designate a transmitted text as God's Word." What, then, is the relationship between the text and the sermon? "Proclamation that has taken place is to become proclamation that takes place." The sermon is the execution of the text in the sense that "it is proclamation of what the text has proclaimed." [17] The text is thus little more than a hermeneutic aid towards the understanding of present existence.

What is our criticism of this system, which in broad outline is also that of Fuchs?

(1) The gap between the past and my present is here bridged by swallowing up the past into the present word-event of preaching. With Bultmann the past action of a God in Christ is pushed into distant obscurity. With Fuchs and Ebeling the past disappears in the present. This has two consequences. First, the once-for-all unique character of the saving event in Christ at a certain point in history is, to be charitable, in danger of being lost. Second, as with Bultmann, the objective *extra nos* character of salvation in Christ is in danger of being replaced by a subjective emphasis on the present event in its significance only for us. It is thus understandable that this modern brand of kerygmatic theology has little understanding of the church (not to mention the sacrament of the Lord's Supper) because of this very individualistic understanding of salvation and its exaggerated understanding of the *pro me* of salvation.

(2) One is still left with a great question mark about the relevance of God's action in Christ in the past. If Jesus Christ, crucified, buried, and risen, is only the Jesus Christ in the word-event of the kerygma, to what then do I pray when I address myself to the risen and glorified Lord? Can I pray to a *Wortgeschehen?*

(3) If "hermeneutics is the theory of words," are we not turning hermeneutics into *Sprachphilosophie,* into semantics? There is such a thing as Biblical semantics, but the task of hermeneutics cannot be confined to this.

(4) Finally, and this is perhaps the real crux of the matter, is this distinction between the written text of the Word and the preached Word legitimate in so far as it makes of the text only a past proclamation of the Word and only potentially the Word of God? Even if the Word of Scripture is the preaching of the Word, Jesus Christ the original Logos of God, can and does not this Word speak to me as God's Word? We have come back in a circle to our first statement, that the present hermeneutical problem issues from what we would judge to be a wrong understanding of the Word of God.[18]

[17] Ibid., pp. 330 ff.

[18] This is made clear by F. Hohmeier, *Das Schriftverständnis in der Theologie Rudolf Bultmanns,* 1964.

Biblical hermeneutics is not the theory of words but the application of the doctrine of the Word of God, the quest for its right understanding.

V. Hermeneutics and Preaching

We are now, I hope, in a better position to be able to formulate the central principles of a Biblical hermeneutic and to draw some practical conclusions for our preaching.[19] From the outset it should be made clear that both kerygma and proclamation, or preaching, are here used in the widest sense to include the preaching of the Word not only in the sermon but also in instruction, whether in schools, confirmation class, or Bible class.

(1) *Sola Scriptura:* Our understanding of the past saving event in Christ and our appropriation of it takes place solely through Scripture as the written record of this event, including the history of salvation in the Old Testament.

(2) *Sola Fide:* But this record is still God's continual challenge to man to accept by faith alone the relevance of this event in the past for himself in the present.

(3) *Lex et Evangelium:* This challenge of God to accept His Lordship comes to us in the form of *Anrede* which cannot be dispassionately and objectively disposed of. Barth's famous *"Wir verfügen nicht über Gott"* can be extended to *"Wir verfügen auch nicht über sein Wort"!* This Word comes to us in the form of Law — "Adam, where art thou?" is first answered by God Himself with "You are a sinner" — and in the form of Gospel — which expects the decision of faith to the question "What think ye of Christ?" to which God again answers "You are a saint."

(4) *Solus Christus:* This, as we saw, is not only a dogmatic statement with reference to our salvation through Christ alone but also a hermeneutical principle in the understanding of this event. In other words, the Word of God is the preaching of the Logos, Jesus Christ, the Word of God. The content of Scripture is Christ, and every verse and chapter of it must be understood in this context.

These basic hermeneutical principles of the Reformation cannot be given up. In this form they may appear very clear and simple, but their application in the proclamation of the Gospel is anything but simple. The following points are offered as some guidelines to their practical implementation as well as pointers to some typical dangers in our preaching.

(1) According to the first principle, our preaching must be Scriptural. Here we must be quite precise. A sermon is not yet necessarily Scriptural if it merely takes its starting point from a piece of Scripture, or if it takes a verse or two of Scripture as the pretext for preaching, or in order to create the right atmosphere or setting for the sermon. The sermon should, rather, reflect the right understanding not only of a certain passage but also of the whole of Scripture. The preaching of any text must therefore presuppose an understanding of all of Scripture, of God's revelation in Christ.

It is surely an exaggeration to say that the whole of the New Testament is ke-

[19] This has been done in the fine book of K. Frör, *Biblische Hermeneutik zur Schriftauslegung in Predigt und Unterricht,* 1961 (soon to appear in English).

rygma. It also contains teaching, *paraine-sis,* that is, exhortation; it contains hymns of praise which are man's response to the kerygma; it contains prophecy. But these are all based on the proclamation of the cross and resurrection of Christ. They presuppose the saving event in Christ. Rightly understood, we can accept Ebeling's phrase: "Proclamation that has taken place is to become proclamation that takes place." This means that the sermon cannot be a mere paraphrase or repetition of the *verba* of the text, but a new proclamation of its *res.* It is to be a new preaching of the Christ, who stands behind every text. In this sense we are to proclaim what the text once proclaimed.

Every pericope of the New Testament which we might choose as a sermon text presupposes the whole event of salvation since it was written in the faith of the post-Easter congregation. This statement is in the first place a hermeneutical guide to understanding, *not* a critical yardstick to be used in determining the historicity of a reported event or word.

(2) Second, with reference to the *sola fide,* the preaching of Christ's saving work can only appeal to God's challenge to us through this event. The relevance of past history must here be accepted in faith on the basis of apostolic witness. Here is where the hermeneutic of Adolf Schlatter sets in, with the original witness of the apostles.[20] His pupil Karl-Heinz Rengstorf has shown in various works[21] that the very concept of "apostle" as a fully authorized representative of the Lord presupposes the Resurrection experience, or better, the event of which they were eyewitnesses. The whole of the New Testament is based on eyewitness kerygma. It seems problematical to go as far as Schlatter who insists on the direct apostolic origin of all the New Testament books, but we must still insist that the proclamation of the New Testament is based on fully authorized apostolic witness. Both this witness itself and the relevance of this witness must be accepted in faith alone. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile." (1 Cor. 15:17)

The preaching of the church as God's challenge to faith is the continuation of the apostolic witness, for the church claims this witness as its own. This constitutes the true apostolicity of the church, not an apostolic office.

The challenge to faith must remain just this. There can be no props to faith in the form of an appeal to other historical data, to archaeological findings, to subjective psychological feeling or experience. The Word comes to us with no other "proof" than the promise of a "new creation" which will follow the obedience of faith. An exegesis of a text may have to illuminate certain aspects of it through the findings of historical science and archaeology, but these dare never become the subject of our preaching. Likewise it is a travesty of God's Word to preach exegetical niceties or controversies. A sermon should reflect

[20] Cf. U. Luck, *Kerygma und Tradition in der Hermeneutik Adolf Schlatters,* 1955.

[21] Cf. his article on *apostolos* in Kittel's *Wörterbuch* I, pp. 397 ff. (English title: "Apostleship," in *Bible Key Words,* 1952); also his *Apostolat und Predigtamt,* 1934; *Die Auferstehung Jesu,* 4 ed., 1960 (soon to appear in English translation by the present writer and J. Wilch).

a deep and thorough exegesis, but it should not preach exegesis.

Finally, another danger. We express our faith by means of dogmatic formulations, but we do not "believe in" dogma. Every sermon involves dogma, reflects the teaching of the church. Have we in the Lutheran Church perhaps offended here?

(3) The distinction between Law and Gospel as a hermeneutical principle must always be taken with the first two. All proclamation of God's will through the Law must presuppose the Word of the Gospel, while the Gospel at the same time implies a new understanding of the Law. What our old homiletical textbooks have stressed remains true: we dare never preach a curtailed Word of God, whether it be a new morality (or moralism!) or a weak "effeminate" Gospel. The sermon dare not present a complete system of dogmatics, but at the same time the whole counsel of God must always be presented — even if indirectly implied — no matter what the occasion. In this connection the occasional sermon or address is certainly the most difficult and dangerous of all sermonic forms. It is especially here that the temptation to use the text only as a pretext for preaching a "fitting" message is greatest. Here also the sermon dare not be allowed to degenerate into a speech for a special occasion. It must also contain the full Gospel. This necessitates, more than ever, the careful choosing of a text.

Second, the right preaching of the Gospel will imply a right understanding of the "decision" of faith. This point is especially important in view of the dangers of modern evangelistic preaching. Our decision of faith is only the answer to God's decision over us. Much of the modern appealing for decisions implies a false understanding of the Word: as if we are in a position to dispassionately view and listen to the Word and then make our decision! Faith is itself a creation of the Word through the working of the Spirit.

(4) All that we have been saying is already an explanation of the *solus Christus.* Christ is The *Hermeneutes,* The Interpreter, who has given us not only a new understanding of God but also a new understanding of ourselves after we have been placed into a new relationship with God. But there are still two ways in which we can easily offend against this principle.

(a) In the first place, our preaching can still lapse into a false anthropology, into a mere analysis of the human situation, usually in terms of a somewhat naive presentation of "modern" sins. This is an error behind much of the one-sided preaching of the Law often found — surprisingly enough, in many evangelistic sermons — or should we call them tirades.

(b) In the second place, we may distort the balanced Christology of the New Testament into a false "Jesuology," preaching not the full risen and glorified Christ, and His present full Lordship over us, but an abbreviated Christology remembering only the words and deeds of the historical Jesus (this is incidentally the central error of Ethelbert Stauffer's theology). This danger is perhaps not so

great in our preaching as in our catechetical work where it may result in a moralistic presentation of the message of the New Testament — just as in the Old Testament we have the danger of presenting the patriarchs and other men of faith as moral examples instead of seeing in them the hand of God at work. Even in teaching it is the whole Christ of faith who is to be taught and proclaimed.

It is not an attack on the doctrine of the Tri-unity of God, nor a revival of a teaching of subordination, to assert that the New Testament always speaks in terms of God's action in and through His Servant, the Christ. This can be clearly demonstrated by a look at the passive forms which are used in the Passion and Resurrection narratives. "He was crucified" means more than "men killed Him." The deep meaning of this statement is "God allowed Him to be crucified." "He was raised" is a circumlocutory expression for "God raised Him." "He appeared" thus also means "God made/allowed Him to be seen." [22]

Our preaching, while Christocentric, must be the proclamation of the action and work of God in and through His Son, just as the preaching of the Old Testament is always the proclamation of the acts of God (cf. Wright's book *God Who Acts*) in and through His chosen people.

(5) The communication of understanding through the sermon presupposes in the first place not only that the preacher has himself understood the text as a result of his exegesis but also that he himself has received new faith. But one more point must be added. What must be "exegized" is not only the written text of God's Word but also the "text" of the human situation into which the Word is to be re-addressed. Here is where anthropology does play into the preaching of the Word and its understanding. A precise analysis of the human situation is necessary lest the sermon be preached in a vacuum. Man must be addressed in his present existence, not in terms of his existence, if this means in terms of existentialist philosophy. Man is always specific man, sin appears in the form of specific sins. An abstract unapplied Gospel is no Gospel at all. Both the Word and the natural state of man are certainly changeless. But in proclamation both must become very concrete. Do we sometimes address the Word to situations and problems which do not even exist in our congregations? The Word must be explicated to lead men through specific problems, to comfort them in specific sorrows and difficulties, to warn them of specific dangers, to confront specific sins.

It is the fact that our preaching does not always do this which may be the reason for our all too frequently platitudinous, stilted, and even naive sermons! It should go without saying that the use of slang or up-to-date language is not automatically a firm guarantee that the sermon is "practical" and relevant to the modern situation. At times we, like St. Paul in fighting the Gnostics, may have to use the terms of our day in communicating and relating the message of the Gospel. But the problem of meaningful communication is finally

[22] The passive reveals a typically Jewish avoidance of the use of God's name. Cf. Rengstorf, *Die Auferstehung Jesu,* Appendix I.

solved not by the use of slang — this in itself may often prove to be a naive flight from the very problem! — but with a careful analysis of the human situation.

(6) Having said this, we have already committed ourselves to a specific understanding of the hermeneutic circle. Our analysis of the human situation is itself made under faith, in the light of the New Testament's own picture of man under sin. The New Testament offers no objective anthropology. It is always the man in Christ and under faith who pictures the life and situation of man under sin.[23] In other words, both our understanding of the Word and of ourselves is continually challenged by the Word. We come to new depths of faith and understanding with and through the understanding already gained from the Word. "Grow in grace." That is the practical conclusion of the hermeneutic circle. Faith is thus itself a hermeneutic agent since it gives me not only a new understanding of myself but also of God's world, an understanding which is continually to be corrected, widened, deepened by the continual hearing of the Word.[24]

VI. From Text to Sermon

Taking proclamation in the narrower sense of preaching, we may finally trace in brief the process from text to sermon.[25]

(1) First, the text must be translated from the original. This first vital stage already involves the hermeneutical question since a translation is not only meant to serve the understanding of a text but already reflects an understanding of it. Here it may be remarked that for the sake of order the church may decide that one version (e. g., AV or RSV) is to be used in public worship, but it cannot do this with respect to the text of the sermon. Here every pastor must do his own work.

(2) The pericope must then be seen within the context of the entire book in which it is found, as well as within its immediate context. This is as important in the Gospels as it is in the Epistles.

(3) Next, any strange concepts, historical or other references in the text must be explained as precisely as possible.

(4) Then the actual work of exegesis begins, that is, the attempt to say in our own words what the writer wanted to say then. For this it may be necessary to bear in mind the concrete situation into which this preachment was first spoken. We can go so far as to say that we have fully "exegized" and understood the text when the necessity of its being preached hits us!

(5) Fifth, we seek in our congregation a concrete situation which corresponds to the situation implied in the text itself in order to avoid preaching to a vacuum. In many cases the original form of the text's preachment may remain the same, since the past and present situations are identical. In other cases a text may not be "preachable."

(6) The writing of the sermon then seeks the best, most pointed, direct, and applicable expression of the "matter" which the text once ex-

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[23] Kümmel, pp. 14 ff.

[24] K. Frör, pp. 55 f.

[25] For the following see W. Marxsen, *Exegese und Verkündigung,* 1957, especially p. 56.

> pressed and still seeks to express. Here we are free to choose material which will best serve the central statement contained in or implied by the text. The message of a sermon should be presentable in the form of one clear statement.

If we remember all the hermeneutical principles which we have drawn up and their practical implications, this central message of the sermon will in turn be *was Christum treibet.* For "we preach Christ and Him crucified."

But one fundamental thing has still been left unmentioned. The Holy Spirit is The *Hermeneutes,* The Interpreter, who gives us faith and understanding, who leads us into all truth. Thus every sermon should be preceded by the fervent prayer: *Veni Creator Spiritus!*

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