

Significant Developments in New Testament Studies During the Past Decade

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A NEW CRISIS

The past decade has witnessed another major crisis in contemporary European theology. Belatedly, the reaction is reaching our shores. Bultmann is no longer supreme on the Continent.¹ Central to the revolt is the matter of the view and use of the New Testament Scriptures. This does not mean that all theologians have returned to orthodoxy. Some have actually gone beyond Bultmann in their reductionism of the gospel message. But in the current confusion and debate, there exist other options besides Bultmann's anti-miraculous philosophy of science or even the modified approaches of the post-Bultmannians. Bultmann had a noble desire to make the New Testament understandable and relevant to modern man. But his firm stand against historical revelation, the supernatural, the redemptive, and even the real objectivity of God as an object of rational knowledge led him to a position where he could take little of the New Testament at face value. The quest for a real Jesus of history was both futile and useless. Most of the words and deeds attributed to Jesus he rejected as abhorrent to naturalism. But now the fences are down again. Since there is no longer a "king" of thought, there is at least a ray of hope for the future in the freer discussion that is now possible.

A NEW HISTORICAL INTEREST

Almost instinctively the student of Christianity returns to historical interests. After all, Christianity's confidence has, in large

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1. Carl F. H. Henry, *Jesus of Nazareth: Saviour and Lord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), pp. 3-9.

measure, been in the fact that, above all others, it is an historical religion. Bultmann's negativism has led to a new quest for the historical Jesus and has taken several different forms. Many studies proceed on presuppositions and methods that guarantee a repetition of the old failures. Those who prejudge the records and rule out the validity of the supernatural are not likely to find a clear picture of the historical Jesus in gospels written to present him as the divinely incarnate Son of God.

There is, however, a new and fortunate context to which the present searcher in quest of the historical Jesus has access. The analysis of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the accelerated pace of archaeological study in Palestine in the past decade have done much to fill the gaps in our historical knowledge of the backgrounds of Jesus' life and ministry. Likewise the Nag Hammadi manuscripts in Egypt extend our knowledge of the history of thought in the early Christian centuries. Many things in the gospels that had formerly been assumed to be Hellenistic and even Gnostic in origin are now seen to be Jewish in context. Gradually the gap closes between the records of the New Testament and our knowledge of the world in which Jesus lived. There is less and less need for fantasy to bridge the alleged "gap" between what Jesus was and did and what the Early Church reported about him. It is hoped that more and more people will find less and less difficulty believing the records of the Jesus who really came as Lord and Saviour. Certain American scholars have observed the remarkable disdain of Jewish scholars in Jerusalem for a compromised position concerning Jesus, and have suggested that the Jerusalem scholars are sometimes more open to the witness of the apostles than are some visiting "Christian" scholars.

THE KERYGMA

The word *kerygma* was not coined in our decade, but it has certainly become established in popular vocabulary in these days. Indeed, it has served a useful purpose. Since neither the old classic liberalism nor Barth and Brunner and Bultmann appealed to a fully reliable written Word of God, there had to be some rallying point for faith if the church were to have either message or relevance in our day. The word *kerygma* has been used to refer to the central message of the New Testament. As compared with the total skepticism toward which much criticism was leading, even a bare minimum of *kerygma*, or gospel, was a gain—however untenable such a shrunken faith might be.

But our decade has also gone beyond this holding operation. Claude H. Thompson took the word that was borrowed from the New

Testament and wrote a *Theology of the Kerygma*,² giving back to it the warmth and content of a vital exposition of the New Testament itself. This illustrates again the fact that the use of such words is determined not so much by etymology and history as by the degree of confidence one has in documents and by what he knows of the living Christ. There can be an adequate scriptural use of words.

THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM

An earlier issue of *The Asbury Seminarian*³ contains a report on the crack appearing in the documentary hypothesis that makes Mark the first gospel and considers Mark and Q the main sources of the other gospels. At the same time that "consensus-conscious" conservatives keep swinging to the documentary view, the crack in the wall keeps widening. One wonders when the wall will topple. In the 1966 meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, a top scholar publicly ridiculed the Q hypothesis and was not challenged. Scholars on both sides of the Atlantic also continue to express doubt concerning Mark's priority. Will the new freedom of discussion reverse the massive literature of a century? If so, how soon? At least a powerful statement is now in print from the pen of William L. Farmer.⁴

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

There is nothing new about statistical studies in either biblical introduction or in the production of helps to Bible study. But now the computer is coming to the aid of scholars. Great claims are being made for it, particularly by A. Q. Morton of the University of Glasgow. Teams of scholars with computers, he visualizes, will introduce a new era in New Testament studies.⁵ The computer is indeed valuable in the compilation of certain data, as for concordances; used judiciously, it could be helpful in other ways. But it is only a machine. It gives back what is put into it. Mr. Morton must remember that the same method which denied the genuineness of certain of Paul's epistles also denied the genuineness of certain of Morton's own writings. Statistics can be abused.

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2. Claude H. Thompson, *Theology of the Kerygma* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962).
 3. Wilber T. Dayton, "A New Look At The Marcan Hypothesis," *The Asbury Seminarian*, XVII, 2, 53-64.
 4. William L. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).
 5. A. Q. Morton, "Statistical Analysis and New Testament Problems," SPCK Theological Collection 4, *The Authorship and Integrity of the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1965), pp. 44-60.

FORM ANALYSIS

The use of form criticism, proceeding on the anti-supernatural presuppositions of Bultmann, makes it possible to reconstruct the teachings of the New Testament into definite patterns quite contrary to the apostolic witness. R. H. Fuller's work, *The Foundation of New Testament Christology*,⁶ is a prime example of the neat and scholarly package that can be made with such a reductionist method. Such work could certainly appear authentic to one who was ignorant of or tolerant of the method as used. Unfortunately, this thoroughly humanized Jesus is in shocking contrast to the Christ of the New Testament. This fact should show how deeply un-Christian this use of form criticism can be.

On the other hand, the analysis of forms, rightly used, can yield the opposite results. Vernon Neufeld studied the references to Jesus in the New Testament and discovered early evidence of remarkable confessions of faith.⁷ Form of expression was the clue to the identification of early patterns. Again, it is the negative presuppositions and not the basic method that can be destructive to faith.

A QUESTION IN FOCUS

The past decade has helped to crystallize a conviction as to where the crux of the modern theological issue is. It is the great epistemological question—the authority of the Scriptures. If inspiration and canonicity no longer mean that God has spoken and that his Word is utterly reliable, no bright springtime of theological promise will ever turn to summer. Without a norm or criterion in doctrinal problems, the theologian is doomed to futility and irrelevance.

As compared with Bultmann, Heilsgeschichte is encouraging with his emphasis that revelation and salvation are objective historical facts. It is good also to hear Pannenberg insist that the truth of revelation is universally valid, and to hear Cullman say that meaning as well as the event belongs to the reality of revelation. But why not go further and accept the evangelical option of Scripture as an authoritative canon of divine truth? As Carl F. H. Henry says, "This black season swept by tempestuous crosswinds will

6. Reginald H. Fuller, *The Foundation of New Testament Christology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965).

7. Vernon H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confession* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963).

emerge into a fruitful theological harvest only if the supernatural resources of the Christian religion are fully recovered."⁸

ACTION BY EVANGELICALS

The past decade has seen many encouraging signs of evangelical thrust. The eighteenth annual meeting (1966) of the Evangelical Theological Society reported 768 members. The Wesleyan Theological Society, organized in 1965 with a similar statement of faith in the Scriptures, is growing rapidly. Many papers have probed matters of New Testament criticism and exposition, and a surprising amount of literature has been produced in the decade, with a remarkable percentage of it dealing directly with the issues of authority, inspiration and canonicity. Breadth, depth, and originality are demonstrated to a gratifying degree.

The decade opened with at least four books in 1957 that bear on the question of authority. R. Laird Harris built his *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*⁹ around the concepts of prophecy and apostolicity as the source of authority. The Evangelical Theological Society published a symposium analyzing the position of church leaders through the centuries, entitled *Inspiration and Interpretation*,¹⁰ edited by John W. Walvoord and authored by conservative scholars. Edward J. Young produced *Thy Word Is Truth*, expounding the Bible's own doctrine of inspiration.¹¹ The first volume of a series on Contemporary Theological Thought appeared with Carl F. H. Henry as editor. All five volumes now existing in the series give space to biblical matters, but two volumes are devoted more exclusively to them. *Revelation And The Bible*,¹² second in the series, is a treasure indeed. The latest, *Jesus of Nazareth: Saviour and Lord*, is most timely in its report on the current situation in theological and biblical matters.¹³ In 1958, James I. Packer made a pungent and forthright statement of the case for an inspired and

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8. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
 9. R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957).
 10. John W. Walvoord, ed., *Inspiration and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957).
 11. Edward J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957).
 12. Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Revelation And The Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1958).
 13. The other volumes in the series are: *Contemporary Evangelical Thought* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), *Basic Christian Doctrines* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), and *Christian Faith and Modern Theology* (New York: Channel Press, 1964).

authoritative Word of God in his book, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*.¹⁴ Bernard Ramm produced *The Pattern of Religious Authority*¹⁵ (1959) and *The Witness of the Spirit*¹⁶ (1960). Klaas Runia and Gordon Clark reflected their own insights as well as the criticism of Barth in *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture*¹⁷ and *Karl Barth's Theological Method*.¹⁸ An excellent monograph by H. N. Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures*,¹⁹ was translated from the Dutch. It grounded canonicity in redemption history itself rather than in church history and demonstrated the Bible's view of its own authority. Bruce Shelley wrote a helpful book on the standards of truth in the Early Church under the title *By What Authority?*²⁰ These, along with volumes not mentioned, have also been supported by a wealth of evangelical journalism in both denominational and general periodicals. This decade has, indeed, coincided almost exactly with the existence of *Christianity Today*, the leading evangelical journal. Though one would not claim that all questions have been settled, the debate has been opened effectively, and valuable material and guidelines have been furnished for a frontal attack on problems.

In addition to these critical studies, the decade has also seen considerable progress on several evangelical commentary series, books relating to New Testament history and at least two large and excellent conservative introductions to the New Testament by Everett F. Harrison and Donald Guthrie.

EVANGELICAL OPPORTUNITY

Two factors spell a unique opportunity for evangelicals in the days ahead. The first is the inadequacy of humanistic and anti-supernaturalistic approaches, which should continue to become more obvious. Second, and more positively, it has already been demonstrated that there are evangelical scholars who have a message for

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14. James I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1958).
 15. Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Religious Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959).
 16. Bernard Ramm, *The Witness of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960).
 17. Klaas Runia and Gordon Clark, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).
 18. Klaas Runia and Gordon Clark, *Karl Barth's Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers, 1963).
 19. H. N. Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers, 1964).
 20. Bruce Shelley, *By What Authority?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

days like these. Cannot they seize the initiative and, under God, turn the tide back to a full recovery of the supernatural resources of the Christian religion for our age and for our posterity?