

# The "New Hermeneutic"

Robert A. Traina\*

It is difficult if not impossible to do justice to a summary and critique of the "new hermeneutic" within the confines of the brief article that follows, but perhaps it is possible to present certain ideas which may be helpful in a firsthand analysis of the documents themselves.

The expression "new hermeneutic" is used in the volume edited by John Cobb and James Robinson to describe the methodology of Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs.<sup>1</sup> This methodology is post-Bultmannian, and thus avails itself of Bultmann's focus on the *hermeneutic* question while it simultaneously attempts to develop that focus in *new* directions.

Though there are certain differences between Ebeling and Fuchs, their views do appear to be in substantial agreement.<sup>2</sup> Thus for the sake of expediency, and because Ebeling seems to have gained prominence as the spokesman for the "new hermeneutic," the following remarks will center on his position, asking throughout the twofold question, "Is his methodology essentially 'new,' and does it represent a viable 'hermeneutic' as regards biblical-historical documents?"

The focal concept of Ebeling's hermeneutic is evident in the title of his programmatic essay, "Word of God and Hermeneutic."<sup>3</sup> In this essay Ebeling states that "theological hermeneutic is the theory or doctrine of the word of God"<sup>4</sup> and consequently accords

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\* Professor of English Bible at Asbury Theological Seminary. Professor Traina's Ph.D. dissertation entitled, "Atonement, History and Kerygma" (Drew University, 1966), deals with this subject.

1. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., eds., *The New Hermeneutic*; Vol. II: *New Frontiers in Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

2. Ebeling himself suggests his agreement with Fuchs. See *ibid.*, p. 78, footnote 1.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-110.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

with the "word-event" (*Wortgeschehen*). To Ebeling's mind, "the question that is now constitutive for hermeneutic . . . is the question where we are encountered by *the* word-event which becomes the source of the understanding of word events . . ." <sup>5</sup> Therefore, he takes as his decisive starting-point that understanding of the biblical word as the witness to faith which comes to expression in the word-event of the sermon and of the person brought to confession of faith by the sermon. <sup>6</sup> When Ebeling applies these principles to New Testament Christology, he tends to identify Jesus with his Word, and to focus on the message of Jesus as *the* witness to faith. <sup>7</sup>

This relation of hermeneutic to word-event does in fact represent a "new" emphasis by comparison with Bultmann, whose pessimism regarding the quest of the historical Jesus made him reluctant to stress Jesus' message, though he did expound that message in his book *Jesus and the Word*. Ebeling breaks with Bultmann's focus on Jesus as speaker-event (*Sprecherereignis*) whose actual words are fundamentally uncertain, for Ebeling's confidence in the new quest of the historical Jesus enables him to consider the word-event as having ultimate hermeneutic significance. Accordingly, Ebeling is bold to affirm what Bultmann would not affirm, namely, that "if the quest of the historical Jesus were in fact to prove that faith in Jesus has no basis in Jesus himself, then that would be the end of Christology." <sup>8</sup>

In spite of this new emphasis, the question is whether Ebeling still retains the Bultmannian tendency to divide what are indivisible aspects of history. For example, just as Bultmann stressed the person of Jesus to the virtual exclusion of his activities and message

5. *Ibid.*, p. 98. Fuchs uses "speech-event" (*Sprachereignis*) to express a similar concern. Thus both men focus on the linguisticity of biblical documents and of man and thereby reveal Heidegger's influence on their thought. See James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Later Heidegger and Theology*; Vol. I: *New Frontiers in Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).
6. See Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, tr. by James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), pp. 427-429, where the principles of biblical hermeneutic are listed.
7. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 201 ff., which contain a discussion of "Jesus and Faith."
8. *Ibid.*, p. 205. Elsewhere Ebeling states categorically that "the relation to Jesus is constitutive for Christology," and that "Jesus is the criterion for Christology" (*ibid.*, pp. 288-289). His entire essay on "The Question of the Historical Jesus and the Problem of Christology" is significant in this connection. See also *ibid.*, p. 205, footnote 1, and the views outlined by James Robinson in *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1959).

and of the other events of his life, so Ebeling seems to divorce the word of Jesus from his person and conduct and from the other occurrences of his life.

If such is the case, it is not due to Ebeling's lack of awareness of the multiplex nature of history. Nevertheless, the upshot may be a fragmentary approach to biblical documents and to their Christ, and indeed to the history of the reader of the documents, which may make difficult a well-rounded and a sound hermeneutic. Thus in his hermeneutic of Jesus, he may not give sufficient consideration to the fact that though the emphasis on Jesus' words is valid and indispensable, Jesus is more than what he says. His role transcends that of the witness to faith who is able to bring men to a confession of faith. In short, Jesus as Word-event is more than language-event, and to understand him primarily if not merely as language-event is to misunderstand him.<sup>9</sup> The same is true of the entire biblical-historical kerygma and of the individual who confronts it, because both involve doings which include but transcend language.

The question whether Ebeling breaks fully with Bultmann's tendency to fragmentize history may be raised more specifically in connection with his interpretation of the Cross and of the Resurrection.

The Cross is viewed by Ebeling as a symbol of faith and as a witness to faith. It represents trust in the unseen God and in the life devoted to the will of God in spite of death. It means faith in God's future even when that future seems to be contradicted by the realities of the present.<sup>10</sup>

These meanings are certainly inherent in the word of the Cross, but do they represent a total understanding of the event, and do they capture that essential distinctiveness which marks it off from the message and martyrdom of the prophets and apostles? It might be answered that the Cross's witness to faith is final and therefore unique. But what makes it final? Is it not an understanding of the crucifixion-complex as a whole, including who died, and why and how he died? If it was Immanuel, the enfleshed Word, who was

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9. See John 1:1-18 in relation to John 20:30-31; see also Matthew 11:1-6. Ebeling tries to guard against the danger of a fragmentary approach to the Jesus of history (cf., e.g. *Word and Faith*, p. 29), but one wonders whether he succeeds.
  10. Gerhard Ebeling, *The Nature of Faith*, tr. by R. G. Smith (London: Collins, 1961), p. 52 ff. A valuable analysis of Ebeling's view in this and other matters is found in Robert T. Osborn's article, "A New Hermeneutic?" *Interpretation*, XX, 4 (Oct., 1966), 400-411.

crucified at Golgotha, does not the Cross-event mean much more than a witness to faith in God in the midst of the contradiction of death?

The same fragmentary approach may be reflected in Ebeling's view of the Resurrection. Says Ebeling, ". . . the 'Easter faith' is really a case of nothing else but faith in Jesus. The faith of the days after Easter knows itself to be nothing else but the right understanding of Jesus . . . to believe in Jesus and to believe in him as the Risen Lord are one and the same thing."<sup>11</sup>

But, we may ask, was there not historically a belief in Jesus before the Resurrection-event which was different from the faith which occurred after the event? Did not the Resurrection-event make a difference for the history of Jesus, reflected in the events of ascension, session, and intercession, which are part of the post-Easter kerygma but are not included in the word about the pre-Easter Jesus? Is it not possible that the Resurrection-event could have happened apart from the response of faith? Such questions as these may help to point up a tendency in Ebeling to cut asunder what belongs together in history, namely, word-event and non-word-event. This tendency is characteristic of Bultmann's existentialist interpretation of the New Testament kerygma.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, though there are certain salutary departures from the Bultmannian view in the "new hermeneutic," as well as the continuation of certain valid emphases, such as the importance of the present-historical dimension and the necessity of a general hermeneutic, there are grounds for concluding that the retention of problematic elements in Bultmann may diminish the hermeneutic value of the so-called "new hermeneutic."

Two underlying factors may account for this situation. The first is Ebeling's seeming acceptance of a critical-historical approach based on the principles of scientific positivism.<sup>13</sup> The second factor is the absence of a clear differentiation between present-historical meanings (*applicatio*) and past-historical meanings (*explicatio*). The result of such a merger of exposition and exegesis, and of making the unquestionably important movement from text to

11. Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, p. 302.

12. Cf. Bultmann's discussion of the Cross and of Easter in Hans W. Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth, A Theological Debate*, tr. by R. H. Fuller (New York: Harper & Bros., 1961).

13. Compare Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, p. 43 ff. and pp. 204-205, with Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" in *Existence and Faith*, tr. by S. M. Ogden (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1960), pp. 291-292.

sermon the decisive starting-point of hermeneutic, may be the weakening of the grammatico-historical approach, which is so indispensable for sound interpretation. The validity of hermeneutic may depend on maintaining a proper sequence, which necessitates beginning with past-historical meanings and moving to present-historical meanings, and on a proper balance between text and sermon. Both of these are lacking in Bultmann, and this lack does not seem to be corrected by the "new hermeneutic."<sup>14</sup>

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14. For a further interpretation of the "new hermeneutic" see Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), especially pp. 47-71.