PREUNDERSTANDING IN HISTORICAL AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

by

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PREFACE

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence which cultural conditioning has on the interpreter in historical and biblical interpretation. It is our contention that the interpreter inevitably brings certain assumptions and attitudes, gleaned from his life situation, to the interpretive task, and that these assumptions and attitudes have a telling affect on his interpretation. The broad comprehensive term we have employed to describe these assumptions and attitudes is preunderstanding. Hence we have chosen to title our study "Preunderstanding in Historical and Biblical Interpretation".

The theme of preunderstanding has been developed in three major sections followed by a brief conclusion. In Section I there is an attempt to define preunderstanding, set up categories of type and function with which to discuss it and to trace its role in historical and biblical interpretation. Sections II and III are devoted to an application of the theme to representative historical and biblical interpretations.

In any study there are choices that must be made. One must decide, among other things, whether to treat the subject intensively or extensively, what method to employ in its treatment and how best to develop the theme of the study. Two choices which have been made in this study should perhaps

be mentioned. (1) I have chosen to briefly define and analyze preunderstanding rather than treat it exhaustively for the simple reason that an exhaustive study would be a thesis in itself, and would not have allowed me to trace the influence of preunderstanding on historical and biblical interpretation. (2) I have also chosen to deal with the subject by surveying a large representative body of interpreters. This has the advantage of allowing us to see the role of preunderstanding in interpretation from several successive eras of history. The danger, however, of such an approach is that it opens one up to the charge of superficiality. We were not, for example, able to do "in depth" historical, psychological and sociological analyses of each of the interpreters considered which might have been possible had we treated only one or perhaps two thinkers. Yet the advantage of seeing a broad spectrum of viewpoints seemed important enough to merit our choice.

Among the lessons which I have learned from the examination of preunderstanding is that no one fully escapes its influence. This holds true just as much for the one who analyzes an interpretation as it does for the one who interprets. It might therefore be in order for me to state in brief outline my own preunderstanding. I will restrict my comments to those aspects of my preunderstanding which I have consciously utilized in the study, though undoubtedly there are many other factors of which I have been less conscious that have

had an equal influence on my analysis. In the first place, I start from within Christian faith. This is foundational. My Christian faith supplies the basic frame of reference and the attitudes which undergird my examination. Secondly, and more specifically, I am guided by the school of thought which affirms that the central theme of the Bible is that God has made Himself known in a series of redemptive historical events which culminate in the appearance of Jesus Christ. This series of events is seen not as separate from the total fabric of history but as supplying the pattern which gives meaning to the structure of history. Thirdly, I have insisted that faith, however it may be thought of theologically, can be analyzed as a preunderstanding. Faith, as it is expressed and experienced by the believer, is a set of assumptions and attitudes. Finally, I have tried, as far as my preunderstanding has allowed me, to be open to all points of view. I personally believe that no one has the corner on all truth, but that anyone who has the necessary skill and insight and who makes a conscientious effort will see some aspect of truth. To this partial vision of truth I have tried to be open.

I would like to acknowledge the helpfulness of Professor John McIntyre and Rev. D. W. D. Shaw in making suggestions for correction and improvement. Generally I have followed standard American spelling. In style and scholarly apparatus I have been guided by the manual, The Modern Researcher, by Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff.

THESIS ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to discuss the role of preunderstanding in historical and biblical interpretation. We define preunderstanding as that set of assumptions and attitudes which a person brings to his apprehension and interpretation of reality or any aspect of it. Because preunderstanding comes in a myriad of shapes, an effort is made to classify them by type and to suggest some categories of function. Once this is done the argument is able to proceed. The initial and foundational point which is made is that certain aspects of reality suggest, even demand, that a particular preunderstanding be present on the part of the interpreter if they are to be fully grasped and adequately interpreted. Judging the Christian revelation to be no exception to this general rule, we set about finding the appropriate preunderstanding for its apprehension and interpretation. We assert that it is faith joined with the historical method which constitutes the only adequate preunderstanding for the interpretation of the Christian revelation.

We then turn our attention to the issues raised by this assertion. The first issue with which we deal is the precise role of a consciously articulated preunderstanding (a hermeneutic) in the interpretive task. This in turn leads us to a discussion of the problem of revelation and history. We next examine the central issue of the study, the role of preunderstanding in historical interpretation, and consider its implications

for the specific task of interpreting the Christian faith. Having defined and categorized preunderstanding and analyzed its role in historical and biblical interpretation, we are in a position to discuss representative interpreters of the faith as they have appeared in and during the life of the church. To this task we devote Sections II and III.

In Section II we discuss the role of preunderstanding in six representative historical interpretations of the Christian faith. In Augustine we see the influence of his exposure to Neo-platonism as he attempts to construct a biblical interpretation of history. Edward Gibbon, a rationalist in love with the glory of pagan Rome, depicts the Christian faith as an enemy of the progress of mankind. The philosopher, Hegel, forces the Christian faith into the confines of his metaphysical system. In Adolph von Harnack we find a nineteenth century liberal world view shaping the categories in which Jesus is understood. Reacting to this liberal mentality, the dialectical theologians of the 1930's, which we discuss in the person of Emil Brunner, attempt to remove the Christ-event from historical scrutiny altogether by creating a realm of super-history. We conclude Section II with an analysis of the views of the American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, whose deep involvement in the American social situation and wide reading in the thought of Western culture, influence his historical interpretation of the Christian faith.

In Section III we turn our attention to six representative

interpreters of the Bible, again attempting to ascertain the role of each interpreter's preunderstanding in his efforts. Origen, under the influence of Platonism and the allegorical method, interprets the Bible as a source book for divine truth. The great reformer, Martin Luther, approaches the Bible in the light of his own unique historical situation and personal experience. Spinoza, a Cartesian rationalist, views the Bible as the product of the popular "imagination" and interprets it accordingly. John Wesley, the leading figure of the Pietist movement, comes to the Bible with the expectancy that it will speak to personal experience. In Charles Spurgeon we find an interpreter who, as a faithful representative of Protestant Orthodoxy, understands the Bible as being the literal Word of God. As a contrast to Spurgeon we complete Section III by examining the views of the liberal American preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, who views the Bible as a thoroughly human book which nevertheless contains lessons of "abiding value".

We conclude our study of preunderstanding in a final chapter in which we attempt to restate the main thread of our theme, summarize the results of its application to representative interpreters and suggest some mandates for the general task of interpretation.

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SECTION I

PREUNDERSTANDING AS A CRITERION FOR ANALYZING HISTORICAL AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Chapter One

The Phenomenon of Preunderstanding

I. The Presence of Preunderstanding

To doubt one's own capacity to be free from preunderstanding which necessarily colors the perception and interpretation of reality is the beginning of epistemological wisdom.[1] Few would claim an "Archimedean vantage-point" from which to peer at truth. C. S. Lewis makes the point by describing what happens when a human being encounters a strange creature on a foreign planet. He writes:

> It was only many days later that Ransom discovered how to deal with these sudden losses of confidence. They arose when the rationality of the _hross_ tempted you to think of it as a man. Then it became abominable--a man seven feet high, with a snaky body, covered, face and all, with thick black animal hair, and whiskered like a cat. But starting from the other end you had an animal with everything an animal ought to have--glossy coat, liquid eye, sweet breath and whitest teeth--and added to all these, as though Paradise had never been lost and earliest dreams were true, the charm of speech and reason. Nothing could be more disgusting than the one impression; nothing more delightful than the other. It all depended on the point of view.[2]

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[1] See M. Merleau-Ponty, _The Phenomenology of Perception_, tr. by Colin Smith, London, 1962, _passim_, for a serious philosophical examination of this issue. For the psychological implications, see Robert S. Woodworth & Mary R. Sheehan, _Contemporary Schools of Psychology_, London, 1965.

[2] _The Silent Planet_, London, 1938, p. 38.

point of view would seem to make a significant difference. Indeed it would appear that nearly all perception and subsequent understanding and interpretation of reality proceed in some measure from the preunderstanding of the participant. To show that this is particularly so in the historical and biblical interpretation of the Christian faith is the primary purpose of this study.

We choose the term "preunderstanding" to describe this phenomenon because it is comprehensive and includes within its scope a number of other words and phrases which have a similar but, on occasion, a slightly different and more specific and limited meaning.[3] We define preunderstanding in a broad and open-ended way as _a body of assumptions and attitudes which a person brings to his perception and interpretation of reality or any aspect of it._[4] The breadth of this definition will allow us to consider a wide range of factors which influence any approach to the given and which constitute the sum-total of what we mean by preunderstanding.

II. The Acknowledgement of Preunderstanding

In nearly every quarter where knowledge is pursued in a serious and disciplined manner there is a recognition that the preunderstanding of the observer enters into his apprehension of reality. The pursuit of universal knowledge of

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[3] See below, pp. 14 ff.

[4] See Donald D. Evans, _The Logic of Self-Involvement_, London, 1963, p. 124.

things as they are in themselves, while still a worthy objective, is generally accepted as an extraordinarily difficult task. Almost all knowledge is conditioned in some measure by the assumptions and attitudes of the knower.

The social sciences have helped us to understand how much of our background we bring to our truth seeking. Psychology and sociology have taught us that we are beings whose rational comprehension is contingent to emotional states and social conditioning. Our intelligence, shaped as it is by sensation, interest and feeling, gives less than true form and structure to sense experience. The influence of our environment affects the form we give to the world around us.

The political scientist and the economist are also concerned with the influence of preunderstanding. H. Richard Niebuhr gives the example of their careful scrutiny of such noble phrases as "the natural rights of man", "all men are created equal", "inalienable rights", etc. to see if they may not be historically conditioned.[5] One does not need to be a professional economist or political scientist to recognize that many such phrases are more the product of prior assumptions than an objective statement of empirical fact. They may, as the Marxist asserts, be mere rationalizations for human activity which have economic considerations as

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[5] The Meaning of Revelation, New York, 1962, pp. 9 ff.

their motive. Whatever the case, the point is made that the environmentally conditioned preunderstanding of the observer must always be given consideration in any analysis of his views. For no observer can get outside of his situation into a realm beyond space and time to give us an account of the way the world really is.

Historians too have been quick to acknowledge different forms of preunderstanding in their work. That history is always understood and written from some point of view is generally accepted by most modern historians.[6] That even the very selection of material is in large part determined by one's preunderstanding has been acknowledged in a recent manual on historical research:

> Since guiding ideas affect both search and selection, let us call the researcher's temperament (i.e. the whole temperament of his mind) and his present intentions and hypotheses his total interest. We may then say without implying any blame that his interests will determine his discoveries, his selection, his pattern making, and his presentation.[7]

Preunderstanding has been regarded for a long time among philosophers as a factor in perception and the debate as to its influence continues today.[8] Something akin to preunderstanding is recognized by Immanuel Kant when he insists in _The Critique of Pure Reason_ that we have no certain knowledge of things in themselves but that our mind gives them shape. Kant argued that our mind imposes patterns

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6 See e.g. Carl Becker, _Everyman His Own Historian_, New York, 1935, pp. 233 ff.

7 Jacques Barzun & Henry F. Grant, _The Modern Researcher_, New York, 1957, p. 160.

8 See below, pp. 22 ff.

and groupings (e.g. time and space) on objects, and that in a sense our minds constitute reality. He takes account of sense experience but goes on to explain that

> although all our cognition begins with experience...all does not precisely spring up out of experience. For it may easily happen that even our empirical cognition may be a compound of that which we have received through our impressions, and of that which our proper cognition-faculty...supplies from itself.[9]

The role of preunderstanding in the perception and formulation of reality has also been acknowledged in the existential-ontological philosophy of Martin Heidegger. In discussing the ontological structure of man's existence, Heidegger writes that "understanding always touches on the whole constitution of being-in-the-world."[10] Magda King, commenting on this Heideggerian theme, writes that "meaning does not lie in words, or in things, but in the remarkable structure of our understanding itself. We move in advance in a horizon of understanding from which and in reference to which the things we meet are intelligible to us...."[11] A slightly different approach to the theme of preunderstanding is developed in the tradition of linguistic analysis by the philosopher Donald D. Evans.[12] He is concerned to show in what ways man's utterances are logically connected with his practical commitments, attitudes and feelings. More

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9 The Critique of Pure Reason, London, 1838, p. 3.

10 Being and Time, tr. by John Macquarrie & E. Robinson, London, 1962, p. 144.

11 Heidegger's Philosophy, New York, 1964, p. 8, italics mine.

12 Op. cit.

specifically, he attempts to provide a logic which will adequately deal with God's self-disclosure which, by its very nature, demands that an appropriate preunderstanding be present in man if he is to apprehend it. After a detailed description of the self-involving elements in everyday language, he applies the "logic of self-involvement" to the biblical doctrine of creation. Without going into a detailed description of his analysis let us pick from it one isolated point which will illustrate our theme. Evans refers to what he calls an "onlook" which is a comprehensive term used to describe the "core of many attitudes".[13] Applying the notion of onlook to creation, he writes that "the recognition of God's glory in world-Creation depends on the onlook which a man adopts...."[14] In other words, one needs a certain type of preunderstanding (a parabolic onlook) to grasp the significance of the doctrine of creation (a complex parable).

Even scientists, whose very method is designed to exclude the intrusion of the personal dimension, have had to acknowledge the presence of preunderstanding. Since Einstein, many authors have suggested that the theory of relativity "proposes a new view of space and time and brings the observing scientist himself into the picture of the physical world."[15] One well-known scientist turned philosopher, Michael

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13 Ibid., pp. 110-111.

14 Ibid., p. 194.

15 Philipp Frank, Philosophy of Science, Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1957, p. 173.

Polanyi, has faced this fact and has devoted his energies in recent years to formulating a theory of personal knowledge suited for science. He writes: "We must learn to accept as our ideal a knowledge that is manifestly personal."[16] Epistemologists sometimes distinguish between knowledge as recognition (as for example: I recognize a friend when I see him) and knowledge that a proposition is true (as when I know that 2 plus 2 equals 4). Polanyi's efforts have been directed toward diminishing if not contradicting this distinction. For Polanyi, recognition is essential to all acts of knowing.[17] In The Tacit Dimension Polanyi states that

> The declared aim of modern science is to establish a strictly detached, objective knowledge. Any falling short of this ideal is accepted only as a temporary imperfection which we must aim at eliminating. But suppose that tacit thought forms an indispensable part of all knowledge, then the ideal of eliminating all personal elements of knowledge would, in effect, aim at the destruction of all knowledge.[18]

Polanyi's most systematic analysis of the personal dimension in all knowledge is found in his Gifford Lectures entitled Personal Knowledge in which he argues that man must always make a commitment and assume responsibility in the quest for knowledge. He writes:

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[16] The Study of Man, London, 1959, p. 27.

[17] Marjorie Green, "The Logic of Biology", in The Logic of Personal Knowledge, London, 1961, p. 191.

[18] The Tacit Dimension, London, 1967, p. 20.

> As I acknowledge, in reflecting on the process of discovery, the gap between the evidence and the conclusions which I draw from them, and account for my bridging of this gap in terms of my personal responsibility, so also will I acknowledge that in childhood I have formed my most fundamental beliefs by exercising my native intelligence within the social milieu of a particular place and time. I shall submit to this fact as defining the condition within which I am called upon to exercise my responsibility.[19]

In the field of theology the interest in preunderstanding has centered in hermeneutics. Here the work of Rudolf Bultmann is most influential.[20] "Every interpretation", he writes, "incorporates a particular prior understanding."[21] Again he says: "It will be clear that every interpreter brings with him certain conceptions, perhaps idealistic or psychological, as presuppositions of his exegesis, in most cases unconsciously."[22] In one essay he asks the pointed question, "Is Presuppositionless Exegesis Possible?", to which he replies in some detail both yes and no. The "yes" however refers to the possibility of doing exegesis without presupposing the results whereas the "no" acknowledges that every exegete approaches the text with specific questions and a certain idea of the subject matter with which the text is concerned.[23] For Bultmann, preunderstanding

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19 Personal Knowledge, London, 1958, pp. 322-3.

20 Bultmann's hermeneutic will be given a fuller examination in the next chapter.

21 "The Problem of Hermeneutics" in Essays, tr. by James C. F. Grieg, London, 1955, p. 242.

22 Jesus Christ and Mythology, New York, 1958, p. 48.

23 Existence and Faith, London, tr. & ed. by Schubert Ogden, 1961, pp. 289-296.

(Vorverständnis) is not only an ever present factor to be accounted for but it is also necessary to the task of interpretation. Without it, understanding would not be possible at all. For, as Günther Bornkamm points out in reference to Bultmann's use of the term, "Only the bearing of life on relevant matters that makes itself felt in preunderstanding can establish communication between the text and the interpreter and make possible a proper examination of the text, allowing the interpreter to ask himself about the text and to revise it on the basis of his own self-understanding."[24]

III. The Characteristics of Preunderstanding

From this brief survey of various disciplines we have attempted to show that some form of preunderstanding is generally recognized as an omnipresent feature in the apprehension and interpretation of reality. It now becomes our task to delineate some of its most important characteristics. The following account is not intended to be a complete analysis of preunderstanding. Our concern is rather to draw attention to those aspects of preunderstanding which are of particular importance in the historical and biblical interpretation of the Christian faith.

We turn first to a brief consideration of how we come to possess a preunderstanding. Here several factors need to be sorted out. Among them is what it is that may be said to possess a preunderstanding. Without getting immersed

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24 The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann, ed. by Charles Kegley, London, 1966, p. 7.

in the intricate psychological and philosophical problems that come to the surface at this point which would only take us away from our theme, we might say simply that what is needed is to isolate and define a synoptic term to refer to that which unites the various internal functions of man, i.e. his capacity to think, feel, choose, imagine, remember, etc. Except for the strict behaviorists, most students of man would not object to speaking of such a unitive entity. Perhaps the least problematic of the terms commonly used is the word "self". Other terms such as ego, psyche, mind, soul, person, etc. have been used in a far too technical sense by assorted disciplines to suit our purpose. The "self", as we will employ the term, is essentially the center of man's inner life. It is the self then which we might describe as coming to possess a preunderstanding.

But how does the self come to possess a *particular* preunderstanding? Quite obviously, the answer is "from our environment". Alfred North Whitehead draws our attention to the influence of the environment and of science in particular on our preunderstanding:

> The mentality of an epoch springs from the view of the world which is, in fact, dominant in the educated sections of the communities in question. There may be more than one scheme, corresponding to cultural divisions. The various human interests which suggest cosmologies, and also are influenced

> by them are science, ethics, and religion. In every age each of these topics suggests a view of the world. Insofar as the same set of people are swayed by all, or more than one of these interests, their effective outlook will be the joint production of these sources. But each age has a dominant pre-occupation; and during the three centuries in question [the last three] the cosmology derived from science has been asserting itself at the expense of older points of view with their origins elsewhere.[25]

This environmental conditioning, as Whitehead implies, includes a wide range of historical, cultural, social and psychological factors. We are conditioned by our nationality, our identification with our nation's political and economic developments, its traditions and its institutions, and its current place in world affairs. We are influenced by our culture and by the very language we speak. No less important in the formation of our preunderstanding are religious, political and educational exposures, social and economic status, family relationships, group associations and our vocational choice. The list could be extended indefinitely. We perceive and interpret reality in a particular way because of this conditioning. This is not to suggest a simple reductionist determinism. It is merely to acknowledge the obvious influence of factors such as these and to suggest that they help shape the preunderstanding out of which we view reality.

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[25] _Science and the Modern World_, New York, 1927, p. ix.

We should also note the way in which the self interacts with our conditioning. Here we would underline the distinction between the terms "self" and "preunderstanding". The former refers to that which is given in existence itself, i.e. that which is common to all men such as intelligence, feeling etc., whereas the latter refers to that which is a product of the interaction between our environmental conditioning and the self. One way to describe this process is to say that our environment supplies the raw material out of which we (i.e. the self) frame a preunderstanding. But this is an oversimplification. It is true that there is an external environment which surrounds us and internal givens with which to react to the environmental stimuli, but it is difficult to separate the two and to clarify their relationship. The history of philosophy and psychology is sprinkled with efforts to solve this problem, and it is not our purpose to offer another possible solution. However there are specific reasons why we call attention to this interaction which itself is the important point for our study.

We do so in the first place to point out that a preunderstanding is a product of this mutuality between the internal and the external. Few would question that our environment feeds and gives form to our mind and emotions. Yet it is equally true that the self shapes and "makes sense" out of the environment. One resulting product of this mutual interaction is a preunderstanding. Another reason for

calling attention to the interaction process is to emphasize that man is not just acted upon by his environment. He may be a participant in the formation of a preunderstanding. He may exercise his intelligence and freedom in the conscious endorsement of assumptions and attitudes with which to approach any given subject. This leads to the final reason for mentioning the process of interaction which is that the quality of the self (the level of intelligence, the depth of feeling, etc.) and the richness of the environment, and the way in which they mingle, will determine the type and functional value of the preunderstandings which we possess.

In addition to a consideration of the way in which we come to possess a particular preunderstanding, it is necessary to suggest a possible way of classifying the various types. We defined preunderstanding as "a body of assumptions and attitudes which a person brings to his perception and interpretation of reality or any aspect of it." The question is: How do we classify the myriad forms in which these assumptions and attitudes appear?

One way of coming at the task of classification is to list several terms which are used in reference to the phenomenon of preunderstanding, noting as we do the shades of difference in their meaning. This will add clarity and precision to our own use of these terms as well as suggest a means of classifying the various types. For simplicity, we will place the terms into their natural groupings.

Because the meaning of most of the terms is self-evident, we will not attempt elaborate definitions but merely call attention to the slightly differing connotations of the most frequently used terms and list their synonyms after them.

A. Those terms which begin with the prefix pre:

1. Preunderstanding: the broad, inclusive term already defined in a general way above. Also prepossession. It should be noted that as we go along we will use the term "preunderstanding" in a general way to refer to all of the assumptions and attitudes which a person may possess and in a specific way to refer to that body of assumptions and attitudes which relate to a particular subject.

2. Presupposition: that which is an antecedent condition.

3. Preconception: an idea or opinion formed prior to observation. Also prenotion, predetermination.

4. Predisposition: an attitude in light of which judgments are made.

5. Prejudice: a feeling or idea which inclines one to make a choice or judgment without forethought. Also bias.

B. Those terms which are analogous to seeing:

1. Point of view: manner of regarding any particular subject. Also viewpoint, perspective, onlook, outlook and standpoint.

2. World view: way of looking at the total complex of reality.

C. Those terms which contain a reference to life:

1. Life-attitude: way of feeling and thinking about life and the world. Also life-posture.

2. Life-relation: the relationship which one has to a given subject. Also life-bearing.

D. Those terms which suggest a structured pattern of thought:

1. Frame of reference: the categories which are employed in giving order to the world. Also framework, horizon of understanding.

2. Construct: a conceptual pattern employed in reference to a specific subject.

From this list of terms we are able to discern at least four types of descriptive categories of preunderstanding. It should be borne in mind that there will be some overlapping between them and that any one preunderstanding may and most often does contain elements of all four categories.

The first type may be described as <u>informational</u>, that is the information which one already possesses about any given subject prior to approaching it. This is preunderstanding of the most basic kind, and terms such as prepossession, and, on occasion, preconception, prenotion and predetermination belong in this category. Seldom, if ever, can one isolate this category from the other categories which we shall mention. In our analyses of various interpretations, therefore, we shall generally subsume the informational element in the other categories.

A second type of preunderstanding may be termed <u>attitudinal</u>. Though this is a broad category, essentially what we have in mind is the temperament which one possesses in his approach to the given. Here such terms as predisposition, prejudice, bias, life-bearing and life-relation are appropriate.

A third type of preunderstanding may be called <u>ideological</u>. In this category we would include both the way we view the total complex of reality (world view, life-attitude, life-posture, frame of reference, framework and horizon of understanding) and the way one views a specific subject (point of view, viewpoint, perspective, outlook, onlook, and standpoint). The terms preconception, prenotion and predetermination also belong to and actually fit better in this category.

The final category we give the label <u>methodological</u>, that is the actual approach which one takes in the explication of a given subject. Terms such as presupposition and construct have meaning in this context. It may be questionable to call a method (e.g. scientific, historical, inductive, etc.) a preunderstanding, but in one sense they do function in the same way as any other type of preunderstanding, i.e. they are assumed in an interpretive piece of work and will influence the results. Yet in another sense these methods are neutral tools employed to insure impartiality and objectivity. In our study we will include methodology in

our analysis of preunderstanding, but give special attention to how the attitudinal and ideological factors influence the use of any particular method (in our case the historical method).

The classification of the various types of preunderstanding leads us on to another important issue which is to find a means of categorizing the ways in which a preunderstanding may function within an interpretation of reality. By interpretation we mean quite simply at this stage of our discussion the task of explaining or telling the meaning of any given subject. We would suggest the following functional categories as a working hypothesis. We will set them up in terms of opposites for clarity although in most cases a particular preunderstanding will not function at one extreme or the other but somewhere along a continuum which has an infinite number of points.

1. A preunderstanding may function as either a major or a minor influence on an interpretation. It may largely determine the conclusions which an interpreter reaches, or it may only be distantly related to his conclusions. This point becomes evident when we make a distinction between those forms of preunderstanding which necessarily lead to a specific conclusion and those which do not. James Barr makes such a distinction when he says that

> We might distinguish between cases where a particular position will, if presupposed, necessarily lead to a certain result, and cases where the 'presupposition'...

> has proved useful in all sorts of relations but which nevertheless has not resulted in uniform results such as might be expected to follow from a logically coercive presupposition.[26]

This latter type of presupposition, of which the historical method serves as a good example, will merely set the broad limits within which a judgment may be reached.

2. A preunderstanding may function as either a negative or positive influence on an interpretation. The negative influence is relatively obvious. It is possible that our preunderstanding may be such that our perception of things as they are is so clouded that we are really not in touch with reality at all, or only minimally. The fact that our minds are filled with all sorts of ideas, experiences, customs and aspirations, many of them unconscious, is certainly the source of much of our trouble.[27] On the positive side, it should be recognized that there is no understanding of reality without some frame of reference in which to receive it. Without some prior structure reality would appear altogether strange, and we could only stare in uncomprehension. The fact that our minds are not _tabula rasa_ makes knowledge possible.[28] To illustrate this, we would call attention to the fact that certain approaches to truth lend themselves to filtering and controlling the

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26 _Old and New in Interpretation_, London, 1966, p. 178.
27 _Ibid._, p. 185.
28 John Macquarrie, _God-Talk_, London, 1967, p. 149.

possible negative influence of preunderstanding (e.g. a distorting prejudice) while others may require its positive, creative influence. The scientific method with its controls and checks is designed to produce the maximum degree of objectivity, whereas a work of art will have no value without the artist's creative participation in the subject. It is important to note that some aspects of reality are either so subtle or so constituted that only those observers with a certain kind of preunderstanding are able to perceive and interpret them at all.

3. A preunderstanding may function in either a comprehensive or a limited area. It may influence the way an interpreter views the total sphere of reality or only the way he views fragments of it. For example, if a person believes in God, this preunderstanding, at least theoretically, should influence the way he views all of reality. It is a preunderstanding which is comprehensive in scope. On the other hand, if a person assumes that all men are entitled to equal rights before the law, this preunderstanding will influence his legal and political views but may have nothing at all to do with the way he studies the stars. This preunderstanding has a more limited application. Implicit in what we are saying is that a person may have any number of preunderstandings which apply in different contexts.

4. It would follow from this that a preunderstanding may function either dependently or independently in relation

to the other preunderstandings which the interpreter possesses. A particular person may, for example, have one comprehensive preunderstanding which contains within it a number of more limited presuppositions. In this case there will exist some kind of dependency relationship between the comprehensive preunderstanding and the limited presuppositions. On the other hand, between limited presuppositions held in regard to totally different subjects, there may exist complete independency. In our studies in Sections II and III we will be concerned primarily with the dependency which exists between the more comprehensive assumptions and attitudes which the interpreter holds with respect to history and Scripture, and the more limited presuppositions which undergird his actual method of historical or biblical interpretation.

5. A preunderstanding may function consistently or inconsistently. It may contain only harmonious elements or it may contain elements which are mutually contradictory. One may, for example, because of a preunderstanding which affirms the equality of all men before God, strongly disapprove of policies which exist in South Africa. Consistency requires that similar disapproval be displayed in other contexts where racial discrimination exists. Yet this same person may be instrumental in blocking the entrance of a negro Christian into church membership. Somewhere within this person's preunderstanding regarding man there are assumptions or attitudes which are operating at cross

purposes. We should also note on this matter of consistency the distinction between what may be logically prior, i.e. factors upon which an argument depends for validity, and what is temporally prior, i.e. what an individual may have assumed in his preunderstanding before he began an interpretive piece of work. An interpretation may be inherently consistent (e.g. a Marxist view of history) but unacceptable because of its starting point (that all history can be understood in terms of class conflict). Consistency does not imply acceptability.

6. A preunderstanding may function consciously or unconsciously. An individual may interpret reality without knowing that he does so from a particular frame of reference or, on the other hand, be very aware of his own starting point. A person may, for instance, consistently prefer Democrats to Republicans, but he may or may not be aware of why he has such a preference. The presence of an unconscious element points us to another category of classification.

7. A preunderstanding may function rationally or irrationally. It may be soundly based or the product of fear. It may be logical or the result of a deep-seated neurosis. It may be as rational as the law of contradiction or as irrational as a conviction that all Oxford dons are malicious.[29]

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[29] See R. M. Hare's essay about "bliks" in Anthony Flew & Alastair MacIntyre, eds. New Essays in Philosophical Theology, London, 1965, pp. 99-105.

Generally, because of the nature of our study, we will not be centrally concerned with the psychological dimension of the irrational aspects of preunderstanding. This is not to say they are unimportant but only that this is not our primary purpose.

8. Finally, a preunderstanding may be open-ended or closed-minded. It may allow itself, by virtue of its structure, to be corrected and altered by evidence, or it may, conversely, reject *a priori* anything which does not nicely fit into its mold.

IV. Preunderstanding and Knowledge

If it is true that various types of preunderstanding, functioning in a variety of ways, are always present in the perception and interpretation of reality, then the question which inevitably arises is whether knowledge of things as they are in themselves is possible. It is beyond our scope to trace the history and issues of epistemology, but a few comments in this area as they relate to our theme should be made.

From what has been said so far, one might assume that a case was being made for subjectivism, i.e. that a proposition may be called true only from the standpoint of any given observer, and that all knowledge then would refer merely to what is in the knower's mind. There is certainly the temptation to engage in the denial of objectivity because every man inevitably sees the world and all that is in it, including

himself, from his own particular point of view. But we would argue that there is a real world of objects which have independent existence about which we can gain knowledge. In the first place, the subjective hypothesis simply does not account for all of reality. There are objects in the external world which give evidence of their own continuity even when they are not observed by human minds. Secondly, we would maintain that even though we peer at reality through the shaded glass of our own preunderstanding, this does not mean we do not see reality as it is. It only means that we have to account for the shaded glass in some way. Our point then is not to advocate epistemological subjectivism but to stress that all knowledge is elusive, and to grasp it demands a great deal of effort on our part, not the least of which is keeping a watchful eye on one's preunderstanding.

We would reject not only total subjectivism but also doctrinaire positivism with its exclusion of traditional metaphysics and theology as legitimate forms of knowledge. The positivists' solution to the epistemological problem was to limit what we may legitimately call "knowledge" to a particular kind. They argued that only that which is empirically verifiable is legitimate knowledge and proceeded to show by linguistic analysis that other traditional forms of knowledge (e.g. knowledge of God) were invalid. "God-talk" was an emotive expression, not a description of reality. But in the last few years there has been a softening of

this position due in part to the general recognition that it rested too heavily on a closed-minded preunderstanding. There is now a more general willingness to recognize as acceptable other types of knowledge and language if a good case can be made for them. Jacques Maritain remarks:

> We are emerging from a positivistic period during which the science of phenomena was regarded as the only valid knowledge, the only one worthy of man. This was the upshot of a long history which began with Descartes' denial that theology could exist as a science, and continued with Kant's denial that metaphysics could exist as a science. We may say that, despite a number of remnants or fossils, this positivistic period is over.[30]

The passing of logical positivism's dominance on the philosophical scene has opened the way for new efforts at understanding how it is that man gains knowledge of that which is external to him.[31]

Our particular concern is to see how it is that man's preunderstanding is related to his gaining knowledge of God as he interprets what he considers to be traces of God's presence and activity in history (including his own history) and in the biblical literature. To do this it will be helpful to distinguish what have been traditionally called levels of knowledge. Though there have been many formulations

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30 The Range of Reason, London, 1953, pp. 3-4.

31 Linguistic concerns are central in this new effort, but a discussion of them at this point would take us too far afield.

of the various levels, we will follow Trueblood in distinguishing five: (1) knowledge of bodies, (2) knowledge of other minds, (3) knowledge of one's own mind, (4) knowledge of values and universals, and (5) knowledge of God.[32]

It is our contention that in order to gain knowledge at these levels it is necessary to possess an appropriate preunderstanding which will correlate with that which is to be interpreted at the given levels. By an appropriate preunderstanding we mean that generally four factors must be present: (1) There must be a certain amount of correct information about what is to be interpreted. (2) There must be an attitude present which is open and receptive to making contact with the subject to be interpreted. (3) There must be an ideological structure which is sufficiently flexible and adaptable to treat fairly and objectively that which is to be interpreted. (4) There must be a methodological approach which is appropriate to the subject to be interpreted.

We would not suggest that the correlation between the preunderstanding and the subject to be interpreted is always a simple one-to-one relationship, i.e. one specific preunderstanding for every subject. On the contrary, one comprehensive preunderstanding may be adequate for any number of subjects. Our point is rather that certain subjects demand that a particular preunderstanding be present before their

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32 David Elton Trueblood, <u>The Philosophy of Religion</u>, London, 1957, pp. 54 ff.

full comprehension is possible. The fact is that often the understanding of certain aspects of reality eludes those whose preunderstanding is inappropriate. Some "get nothing out of" Beethoven and others still believe the earth is flat. Their preunderstanding makes them closed to the meaning of the signals sent in their direction by musical tones and scientific evidence. John McIntyre underscores this general point when he argues for the necessity of an attitude which can adequately deal with the given in Christology.[33]

He makes the further point that the given also determines the method which must be employed in the analysis of the given. He says: "We are, therefore, in fact now taking a further step and saying that the given not only determines the appropriate attitude to adopt towards it; it also prescribes the method we must follow in its explication."[34] Since our concern is with the knowledge of God, our task becomes one of finding the appropriate preunderstanding for such knowledge. Such a preunderstanding will include informational, ideological, attitudinal and methodological elements. We shall limit ourselves in this discussion to the biblical framework and say that the knowledge we seek is

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33 The Shape of Christology, London, 1966, p. 16.
34 Ibid., p. 17.

not knowledge in general about an abstract Being but knowledge of God as He has disclosed Himself in Jesus Christ. At this point we are marking off the perimeters which limit this study as well as affirming the preunderstanding which guides it. The Bible is quite clear that such knowledge comes by faith.[35] Faith is the preunderstanding which is able to rightly grasp God's self-disclosure. Human faith is the correlative preunderstanding of divine revelation. It is by faith that we are able to perceive and interpret the reality of God.

At this point the question arises as to whether it is legitimate to refer to faith as a preunderstanding. It might be argued that faith is rather that which preunderstanding influences. Such a view would tend to emphasize that aspect of faith which directly apprehends God. Faith so conceived would then be more of an immediate apprehension of God than a prior understanding about God. While this emphasis may call attention to one important dimension of faith, it does not mean that faith cannot still be correctly classified as a preunderstanding. In the first place, underlying this view of faith are assumptions about God's existence and attitudes of trust and openness to the divine presence. Such a body of assumptions and attitudes is

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[35] We are not saying here that faith can prove the existence of God. That is another question altogether. We are saying that if God's existence is assumed, we may be said to know Him if we have faith. Ronald Hepburn in his Christianity and Paradox, London, 1958, pp. 122 ff., argues against the question-begging procedure of attempting to prove God's existence from within a position of faith which already assumes it.

certainly within the range of our definition of preunderstanding. Secondly, it is true that faith is influenced by particular prior assumptions and attitudes as we shall argue a little later on. But this still does not mean that faith cannot be called a preunderstanding. As we have pointed out, one preunderstanding may influence another. Finally, this conception of faith as an immediate awareness of God does not exhaust all that the biblical authors and the church have understood by faith. Faith also contains another dimension.

This brings us to the place where we must examine in general terms what the Bible does mean by faith. Faith as it is described in the Bible has at least two dimensions, though we must bear in mind that faith is essentially one act which involves the total person. First, faith contains a cognitive element, i.e. faith <u>that</u> God is and has acted in certain ways. The word is used as bare intellectual assent by only one author of the New Testament (James 2:14-26) and then with an ironic twist. The cognitive element is more often regarded as right belief about God (e.g. Jude 3). Such a use of the term implies both informational and ideological assumptions. Although this cognitive element is not the only one, it is certainly foundational. To say that we have knowledge of God we must at least have some correct information and ideas about Him. For our purposes, we will say that the minimum cognitive component consists

of a belief that God is and that He has made himself known in Jesus Christ.

A second dimension of the biblical doctrine of faith is the attitude or complex of attitudes called trust, i.e. faith in God. We are exhorted to trust God, His promises and all that He has done for us. Such trust becomes efficacious (e.g. Ephesians 2:8,9). In Pauline terms, we are justified by faith. This category of faith involves a personal dimension which carries us beyond the first category of cognition. To know God by trusting Him is not so much to say that we know about God as it is to say that we know Him as a person who relates Himself to us. John Hick describes the nature of faith in the following way:

> Thus the primary religious perception, or basic act of religious interpretation, is not described as either a reasoned conclusion or an unreasoned hunch that there is a God. It is, putatively, an apprehension of the divine presence within the believer's human experience. It is not an inference to a general truth, but a 'divine-human encounter', a mediated meeting with the living God.[36]

Thus we may be said to be in a position to gain knowledge of God when we possess a minimum of correct information and ideas about Him and are personally related to Him. Faith is the necessary preunderstanding for a full comprehension of God because it corresponds to the nature of the given. It alone contains the appropriate assumptions and attitudes which make it possible for us to apprehend God.

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[36] Faith and Knowledge, Ithica, N.Y., 1957, p. 129.

Several issues regarding this assertion that faith is _the_ necessary preunderstanding for the knowledge of God now come to the surface. The first is this: When we speak about faith, are we implying that the man of faith is somehow free from a spatio-temporal point of view in reference to his understanding of God? The answer of course is no. The believer's faith may be genuine and efficacious, but this does not mean that its contours are not shaped by the environment of which it is a part. We might describe the process by saying that our relationship with God is made secure by faith but that we understand that relationship of faith in terms of the thought-forms of our surroundings. The assumptions and attitudes of which our faith consists will always be influenced by our time and place in history and will be expressed in the categories which are a part of our life situation.

This means, secondly, that if we are to have the clearest possible conception of God, our environment must be such as to continually expose us to God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ. The preunderstanding of faith must be sustained in a community (the church) which is both continuous with the historical act of revelation and through which God continues to reveal Himself. It means also that if our conception of God is to be accurate, we need to constantly test and refine the content of our faith by placing it over against the biblical documents which attest to historical revelation.

Only in this way can we keep our faith close to the biblical description.

A third matter is the way in which faith functions as a preunderstanding. Though we shall dwell on this point at length throughout our study, it might be well to make two initial observations: (1) While faith may be a gift of God,[37] it is still a human possession. It may, for example, contain inconsistent and irrational elements and function as a negative influence on an interpretation. Our point is that there is really no such thing as "pure faith", and that the preunderstanding of faith may be functionally described in the same manner as any other preunderstanding. (2) Because our faith is formed out of and expressed in terms of our life circumstances, our understanding of God and interpretations of the historical and biblical material which attest to His revelation in Jesus Christ will tend to reflect these circumstances. It follows that the preunderstanding of faith will serve merely to set the broad limits within which a wide range of interpretations may be reached depending on the interpreter's total life environment.

While faith may be said to contain the minimum necessary informational, attitudinal and ideological factors for knowledge of God, it only implies an adequate method of explication of that knowledge. We have mentioned already that the knowledge of God which we seek is that which comes by God's

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37 See Søren Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, tr. by David Swenson, Princeton, 1936, p. 47.

self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. We have clearly cast our lot on the side of revelation rather than natural theology. If knowledge of God comes via Jesus Christ, our method of explication will necessarily involve us in the doing of history. As John Hick says: "In Christianity the catalyst of faith is the person of Jesus Christ. It is in the historical figure of Jesus the Christ that, according to the Christian claim, God has in an unique and final way disclosed himself to man."[38] To give a full account of our knowledge of God as He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ we shall need to employ the critical tools of historical study as part of an adequate preunderstanding for the interpretation of the Christian faith.[39]

There is one final matter which has been implied but needs to be made more explicit in our discussion of preunderstanding, namely the precise relationship between knowledge, preunderstanding and interpretation. We have suggested that the knowledge with which we are concerned in this study is knowledge of God.[40] We said further that one may be said to gain such knowledge only when one possesses the preunderstanding of faith. But the preunderstanding of faith is dependent upon God's historical self-disclosure in Jesus Christ which is attested to in Scripture. We might therefore

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[38] Op. cit., p. 196.

[39] The implications of this point are broad enough to merit extended treatment, and we have therefore devoted three chapters to the "problem of history". See chps. 3-5.

[40] See above, p. 24.

clarify the relationship of these elements by saying that we endeavor to gain knowledge of God by interpreting the historical and biblical data surrounding the Christ-event from within the preunderstanding of faith. We would readily admit the circularity involved in this relationship, i.e. that the preunderstanding of faith in interpretation presupposes some knowledge of God. Yet all interpretation proceeds on the condition that the interpreter has some prior understanding, however limited, of that which he is to interpret. There is a reciprocal relationship between our preunderstanding and the matter to be interpreted (the hermeneutical circle). The preunderstanding which we already possess gives us the capacity to penetrate the work to be interpreted. As we do so, the content of what we are interpreting acts upon our preunderstanding to enlarge it, modify it or change it as the case may be.

Several issues have been raised along the way in our discussion of the phenomenon of preunderstanding. Four of them demand further special attention as we attempt in this section to examine preunderstanding as a criterion by which to analyze the role of prior assumptions and attitudes in historical and biblical interpretation. The first one is the relationship between preunderstanding and hermeneutics. In what way is preunderstanding related to the interpretive method of the Christian theologian as he approaches the

historical and biblical data seeking knowledge of God? This in turn raises a second issue, viz. the nature of God's revelation. Are we justified in calling revelation historical? If so, this will point us to a third question. What is the role of the interpreter's preunderstanding as he employs the historical method in his effort to "get at" the historical revelation? Finally, we will turn our attention to the relationship between faith as a preunderstanding and history as a method of explication.

Chapter Two

Preunderstanding and Hermeneutics

I. Preliminary Considerations

It is in the area of hermeneutics where the concept of preunderstanding has been most widely discussed and where it has special relevance. Bultmann's emphasis on the importance of preunderstanding (<u>Vorverständnis</u>) in the hermeneutical task, and the widely used model of presupposition as a means of controlling the quality of interpretation[1] have brought the issue to the center of the theological discussion. The fact that the interpreter inevitably has "tacit assumptions embodied in the premises from which he starts, assumptions of which he may not be barely conscious, assumptions...which may be long established starting-points which he has never seen fit to question"[2], has forced interpreters to take cognizance of the pivotal nature of preunderstanding.

But before examining the current hermeneutical discussion as it relates to the concept of preunderstanding, we would do well to draw attention to two preliminary matters. The first is that some caution should be exercised in the use of preunderstanding as a category for analyzing interpretation.[3] For example, one cannot disprove the validity of an inter-

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1 See Barr, <u>op. cit</u>., p. 176.
2 McIntyre, <u>op. cit</u>., p. 34.
3 Barr, <u>op. cit</u>., pp. 179 ff.

pretation merely by pointing to the frame of reference of the interpreter. The critic must produce a better organizational structure or show why the preunderstanding necessarily diminishes the quality of interpretation. One has to guard against the temptation of thinking that a refutation is complete simply by revealing "hidden" presuppositions. It is also true that preunderstanding is not always _the_ decisive element in an interpretation. It is possible that in certain cases, the interpreter's preunderstanding may have very little to do with his results. And of course there may be another approach to analyzing a particular interpretation which facilitates far more understanding. To analyze an interpretation in terms of preunderstanding is only one way among many in which it could be done. Finally, as we mentioned earlier, this model can lead down the futile epistemological road of subjectivism and skepticism. Even given these cautions, it is still nevertheless necessary to weigh the influence, both positive and negative, of the whole complex of antecedent ideas, attitudes, methods and customs with which the interpreter approaches his material. As we explore this subject, it will be helpful to keep in mind the distinction between how the interpreter himself makes conscious use of some form of the concept of preunderstanding as a guide to interpretation, and how the interpreter, often less consciously, is influenced in his interpretation by assumptions and attitudes which are the result of

historical conditioning. In this chapter we will pay particular attention to the former.

A second matter to note is the shifting emphases in hermeneutics since the Reformation. The Roman Catholic assertion that the revelation testified to in Scripture can only be understood in light of the tradition presented by the church, which became for the Catholics the solution to the hermeneutical problem, was rejected by the Reformers. Against this Catholic view of tradition, the Reformers posited the doctrine of <u>sola scriptura</u> and maintained that Scripture had its own illuminating power. As Gerhard Ebeling observes, this became one important aspect of the hermeneutical position of the Reformation, though the implications of it may not have been fully understood by the Reformers or their immediate followers.[4] Following the Reformation, Protestant hermeneutics dealt primarily with the rules to be observed in exegesis. In Protestant Orthodoxy, because of the identification of Scripture as the Word of God, the hermeneutical problem was focused on the study of each biblical document, both the literary context and the wider situation in which it appeared. This tendency was given further impetus by the rise of critical biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century. Understanding Scripture required the study of:
(a) the structure and idioms of the biblical languages;
(b) the type of literature represented, i.e. prose or poetry,

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[4] <u>Word and Faith</u>, London, 1963, pp. 305 ff.

history or allegory, literal or symbolic, or perhaps a particular genre found in the Bible such as apocalyptic; (c) the historical background; (d) the geographical conditions; and (e) the life-setting (Sitz im Leben).[5] This hermeneutical tradition, with few but very important exceptions, continued in full sway into our own century.

These important exceptions, as they appeared most noticeably in Schleiermacher and Dilthey, have greatly influenced the development of hermeneutics in our own time, especially the work of Rudolf Bultmann. Largely due to Bultmann, following the tradition of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, the word "hermeneutics" has taken on a much broader reference. It is generally used to describe the attempt to span the gap between past and present. The gap is not only temporal; it is also cultural, dealing with world views and ways of thinking. Carl Braaten defines hermeneutics as "the science of reflecting on how a word or an event in past time and culture may be understood and become existentially meaningful in our present situation."[6] It involves "both the methodological rules to be applied in exegesis as well as the epistemological presuppositions of historical understanding."[7] James Robinson, among others, describes

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[5] James M. Robinson & John B. Cobb Jr., eds., The New Hermeneutic, New York, 1964, pp. 12-15.

[6] History and Hermeneutics, Philadelphia, 1966, p. 131.

[7] Ibid.

this wider reference of hermeneutics as a shift from "explaining" (Erklärung) to "understanding" (Verstehen).[8] It is in the broader sense that we will employ the plural term "hermeneutics". The singular, "hermeneutic", is generally used in reference to a particular frame of reference from which to proceed to interpretation. A given hermeneutic is essentially a self-consciously chosen preunderstanding containing informational, ideological, attitudinal and methodological components. It is designed to be a major positive influence and to operate consistently, rationally and open-endedly throughout the work of interpretation in order to facilitate maximum understanding.

With these preliminary considerations in mind, we can proceed to analyze the role of preunderstanding in the present discussion of hermeneutics. This will enable us to see more clearly the place of preunderstanding in the general task of interpreting the Christian faith. We will turn first to a review of the hermeneutical theories of two influential nineteenth century thinkers, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey, especially as they form the backdrop for the work of Rudolf Bultmann. From there we will consider briefly the influence of Martin Heidegger with his emphasis on the understanding of language as the vehicle of expressing what is taking place in the life of a culture, and indeed as a vehicle for Being itself. We will then be in a position to

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[8] Robinson and Cobb, eds., The New Hermeneutic, pp. 19-20.

look at Bultmann's views.

In a second section we will attempt to sketch how the hermeneutical debate has recently branched out in a number of new directions. The chief figures in the discussion are Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs who see language as the key to unlocking the hermeneutical treasure chest, Heinrich Ott who endeavors to combine the insights of Barth, Bultmann and Heidegger into a meaningful hermeneutic, and Wolfhart Pannenberg who attempts to gather up the various strands of the debate with his concept of Universal History (<u>Universalgeschichte</u>).

How and why these developments have taken place and the role of preunderstanding in the various points of view represented is now where we must turn our attention.

II. Hermeneutics From Schleiermacher to Bultmann

It was Schleiermacher who was particularly conscious of the fact that more was needed to understand the contents of the Bible than the mere employment of the methods of scientific exegesis. To understand the biblical texts, the interpreter must join literary and historical analysis with intuition and imagination. The gap between author and interpreter cannot be spanned by objective analysis alone. The critical historical method must be supplemented by an imaginative reconstruction of the selfhood of the speaker or writer. This imaginative reproduction of the creative act by which the work was first produced goes far beyond the principles of philological science and moves into the realm

of art.[9] Such a movement does not discount the importance of the grammatical and historical. The interpreter must know all he can about the language used by the author and about the total historical complex in which he lived. Only by a thorough study of the author as one who is both objectively and subjectively conditioned by the language he employs and the history of which he is a part can the process of empathic interpretation begin. The often quoted statement of Schleiermacher bears this out as he asserts that the "task can also be expressed in this way: to understand the text just as well as and then better than the author himself understood it."[10] However once this goal is realized, the interpreter is then in a position to get on with the real work of interpretation which is to "divine" the meaning of the text by identifying himself with the author in such a way as to grasp his individuality and purpose. This is made possible because every man has a sensitivity for all others. It "appears to rest only on this fact, that each individual carries in himself a minimum of all others."[11] So for Schleiermacher the hermeneutical task begins with an initial study of the historical

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[9] Richard R. Niebuhr, Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion, London, 1965, p. 79.

[10] Hermeneutik, Nach den Handschriften, ed. by H. Kimmerle, Heidelberg, 1959, p. 87. Schleiermacher writes: "Die Aufgabe ist auch so auszudrücken die Rede zuerst eben so gut und dann besser zu verstehen als ihr Urheber."

[11] Ibid., p. 109. "Die divinatorische ist die welche in dem man sich selbst gleichsam in den andern verwandelt, das individuelle unmittebar aufzufassen sucht."

circumstances and the linguistic symbols of the author, followed by an effort of psychological re-creation or "divination".

Schleiermacher's contribution was to widen and deepen the scope of hermeneutics by making "understanding" its central core. Both his scientific philological work which gave new light on the way human speech is used and his emphasis on artistic penetration which encouraged a sympathetic and intuitive reproduction of the author's individuality in the interpreter had a profound influence, even on those who disagreed with him.

But certain potential dangers are inherent in a hermeneutical approach which gives primacy to subjective identification with the author, though this is not to say that such an effort is not necessary in any interpretation. The first is that in a psychological re-creation it is extremely difficult to take into account all the differences between historical situations. Even by granting the common elements of experience between author and interpreter, it is still next to impossible to span the centuries. These common experiences shared by all men do not offset the divergent outlooks and temperaments of men of different historical eras. A second potential danger in a psychological hermeneutic is that it would seem inevitable that the interpreter, in spite of a thorough historical preparation which Schleiermacher emphasizes, would still unconsciously impose his own

preunderstanding upon the interpretation. He would be inclined to read into the author's internal frame of reference his own feelings and attitudes. This leads us to a third possible danger in Schleiermacher's method of interpretation which is the failure to freely acknowledge that the author is not trying to describe and discuss his soul or inner life, but a real subject, a subject which in fact easily gets lost with the emphasis on subjective identification with the author. The implications of this for biblical hermeneutics becomes serious when God as subject is ignored or denied because of an overemphasis on discerning the faith or attitude of the author.

It is obvious that the role of preunderstanding in Schleiermacher's hermeneutical system is an important one. His own personal background and his cultural and historical surroundings had their influence on the formation of the preunderstanding out of which he approached the Christian faith.[12] His early experiences with the Moravians with their stress on personal piety, and his later social contacts in Berlin and Halle involving as they did emphasis on earnest and frank conversation, embued him with a sensitivity to the subtle innuendo of nuances and tones in the speech and gestures of others. Also, living in the age of Romanticism, he was made particularly conscious of the meaning and importance

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12 See R. R. Niebuhr, op. cit., pp. 78 ff.

of personal experience and creative imagination, as well as rigor, in scholarly work. But what is even more important for our purpose is to see the place he gives to artistic sensitivity and proper attitude as a necessary "preunderstanding" for interpretation. The interpreter must have a sympathetic affinity to do justice to a given text.

A similar place is given to the role of preunderstanding in the hermeneutical theory of W. Dilthey. He too stressed the need to go beyond traditional hermeneutics by giving a greater role to understanding, understanding which can only be realized by an appropriate frame of reference with which to approach the text. For Dilthey, as with Schleiermacher, the interpreter must experience or re-experience the original creative moment of the author in order to do justice to the text. True understanding only comes about when the interpreter, after a thorough study of the grammatical, linguistic and historical background, projects himself into the life of the author by an imaginative act, recreating the author's own situation.[13] In Dilthey's own words:

> Understanding is a rediscovery of the I in the Thou; mind rediscovers itself on higher and higher levels of systematic connection; this identity of mind in the I, in the Thou, in every subject within a community, in every system of culture, and finally in the totality of mind and of world history, makes possible the joint result of various operations performed in the human studies.[14]

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[13] H. A. Hodges, Wilhelm Dilthey: An Introduction, London, 1949, p. 27.

[14] Ibid., p. 114.

Such understanding in the interpretive process defies exact scientific explication and can only be learned from interpreters of genius.

While both Schleiermacher and Dilthey stressed the need for creative empathy on the part of the interpreter, it was Dilthey who saw more clearly that historical events in the past must be read as expressions of historical life. The historian, according to Dilthey, is able to interpret the past because all historical events are effects of the human spirit in whose structures and capacities the historian also participates.[15] Yet Dilthey did not altogether escape the potential limitations of the psychological method. The danger of reducing the understanding of a historical document to the possibilities of common experiences between author and interpreter does not allow for adequate interpretation of the new and uncommon. These events are in danger of being ruled out by the limitations of the hermeneutical method. When it comes to biblical interpretation, all that can be heard is what common human experience allows. This of course excludes the possibility of a unique revelatory act of God in history, an event which by definition cannot be handled in a psychologically determined hermeneutic.

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15 Wilhelm Dilthey, Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. I., Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften, Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte, Stuttgart, 1959, pp. 375 ff.

Before we consider the central figure in the modern hermeneutical scene, Rudolf Bultmann, it is necessary to examine the method of interpretation of one more writer who has influenced Bultmann's hermeneutical position, in addition to Schleiermacher and Dilthey, viz. the philosopher Martin Heidegger in whose thought preunderstanding plays a significant role.[16] The concept of hermeneutics is first introduced by Heidegger in _Being and Time_ where the phenomenology of _Dasein_ (human existence) is called a "hermeneutic". As his theme is developed Heidegger uses two words which mean interpretation: (1) _Auslegung_, which is an informal kind of interpretation that accompanies every act of understanding. It is the frame of reference (_Vorstruktur_) which we bring to any situation and which makes possible understanding; and (2) _Interpretation_, which describes the more specific and explicit interpretation of a text. In this case there will also be preunderstanding which we bring to the task that constitutes for Heidegger what he calls the hermeneutical situation.[17]

With this brief background we will follow John Macquarrie in dividing Heidegger's hermeneutical position into three phases which are not separate and unrelated, but constitute a unity.[18] Phase one, found in the writings of the so-called

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16 See Hans-Georg Gadamer, _Wahrheit und Methode_, Tubingen, 1960, pp. 240 ff., 250 ff.

17 _Being and Time_, pp. 147-150.

18 _Op. cit._, pp. 147 ff.

"earlier Heidegger" and which had the greatest influence on Bultmann, interprets the text in terms of man's self-understanding. Here preunderstanding is given an important place. Phase two represents a shift away from preunderstanding as defined in phase one to an attitude which receives the text itself as it confronts the interpreter. Here the interpreter has a more passive role. As Heidegger says: "Hence in interpreting it [the poem he is considering] we must avoid not only inappropriate ideas of man but all ideas of man whatsoever. We must attempt to hear only what is said."[19] In phase three the poet has a kind of direct rapport with his theme and his language is the language of Being. The interpreter listens to the language of the poem as the self-expression of Being.[20] Maquarrie summarizes his understanding of Heidegger's hermeneutic by saying that "language is to be understood as both an existential and an ontological phenomenon; interpretation demands both questioning and listening, a sense of direction and a willingness to be directed."[21] What is important to note for our theme about Heidegger's view of hermeneutics, as was the case with Schleiermacher and Dilthey, is the emphasis on an appropriate preunderstanding in order to hear what is being said, whether the message is existential or ontological, whether we question

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[19] An Introduction to Metaphysics, tr. by Ralph Manheim, New Haven, 1959, p. 146.

[20] See James M. Robinson & John B. Cobb, eds., The Later Heidegger and Theology, New York, 1963, p. 14.

[21] Op. cit., p. 167.

the text or merely listen to it.

The hermeneutic of Rudolf Bultmann, which has been so important in Protestant theology, has as its foundation Heidegger's phase one, viz. that the text is to be interpreted in terms of man's self-understanding. The movement of Bultmann's method of interpretation is away from language--of which mythological language serves as a model--back to an understanding prior to, and more authentic than, the language.[22] The way to grasp the real meaning of historical phenomena is by the analysis of human existence via Heidegger's philosophical categories. Bultmann's concern is to discover the condition under which any historical understanding is possible. It consists, he believes, in the interpreter's relationship in his life to the subject which is expressed in the text. As with Schleiermacher and Dilthey, there must be a certain common element between the author and the interpreter, i.e. a common interest in a common subject. This interest can take a different form in author and interpreter, yet, without a living relation to the message of the text, the interpreter will never comprehend it.[23] Bultmann writes that "the presupposition for understanding is the interpreter's relationship in his life to the subject which is directly or indirectly expressed in the text."[24] This relationship to the text,

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22 Robinson & Cobb, eds., The New Hermeneutic, p. 38.

23 Heinrich Ott, "Rudolf Bultmann's Philosophy of History" in Kegley, ed., op. cit., p. 55.

24 Essays, p. 256.

which Bultmann describes as preunderstanding, shapes the question which is put to the text and to which the text will respond. The preunderstanding which may or may not be explicit is the understanding of one's own existence in its relationship to the subject of the text, and it is this preunderstanding which makes possible the understanding encounter with history.

When it comes to the biblical writing, the task of the interpreter is the same as it is for all other kinds of literature. The interpreter brings to the biblical text his preunderstanding and his openness to the meaning of man and proceeds to interpret the original mythological statements of Scripture in terms of the understanding of human existence before God which they adequately express. It is a question of how man's existence is understood in the Bible. As Bultmann expresses it: "If the object of interpretation is designated as the inquiry about God and the manifestations of God, this means, in fact, that it is the inquiry into the reality of human existence."[25]

If preunderstanding plays such a central role in interpretation, does it prohibit objectivity? Bultmann argues that it does not on the grounds that historical inquiry is different from scientific. The interpreter cannot be detached,

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[25] Ibid., p. 259.

"for facts of the past only become historical phenomena when they become significant for a subject which itself stands in history and is involved in it."[26] So every formulation has the potential of leading to an unambiguous, objective understanding, if the interpretation is systematically carried out. For Bultmann, to "demand that the interpreter must silence his subjectivity and extinguish his individuality, in order to attain to an objective knowledge is, therefore the most absurd one that can be imagined."[27]

But the question which immediately rises to the surface is whether Bultmann's concept of existential self-understanding is too limiting as a hermeneutical principle. We would grant that it forms an integral part of any adequate interpretive method, but when it is used exclusively as the only norm of interpretation does it not in fact censor the text? Does his commitment to the hermeneutical principle that the life-bearing of the interpreter is the condition for understanding prevent him from making use of statements about God, the world, Christ, and man as they are contained in the objectified language of the New Testament?[28] Is this not a violation of the biblical texts? Also one wonders if his assertion that the Bible should be interpreted by

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[26] *Ibid.*, p. 254.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 255.
[28] Gunther Börnkamm, "The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann" in Kegley, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 10 ff.

the same method as other literature does not contain ambiguity. He does believe that the word of God is heard in Scripture, and, as Gadamer points out, Bultmann does operate with a preunderstanding full of theological assumptions.[29] Perhaps the theologians should admit the possibility of a sacred and profane hermeneutic, and acknowledge that in biblical interpretation they do employ a preunderstanding which is conditioned by experiences and interests which are less than universal, viz. the personal insight of faith. Perhaps the category of human existence as the only appropriate preunderstanding in biblical interpretation is too narrow and room should be made for faith as given in the community of believers which understands the Bible as primarily the testimony of God's redemptive acts in history, and only secondarily though also necessarily as an explication of human existence.[30]

III. Hermeneutics Since Bultmann

Bultmann's work in hermeneutics has been continued by a number of theologians with varying emphases. Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebeling have attempted to go beyond Bultmann toward a more ontological hermeneutic bearing similarities

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[29] Op. cit., pp. 314-315. Gadamer writes: "Auch als wissenschaftliche Auslegung des Theologen müss sie stets festhalten, dass die Heilige Schrift die göttliche Heilsverkündigung ist. Ihr Verständnis kann daher nicht allein die wissenshaftliche Erforshung ihres Sinnes sein. Bultmann schreibt einmal: 'Die Interpretation der biblischen Schriften unterliegt nicht anderen Bedingungen des Verstehens als jede andere Literature.' Aber der Sinn dieses Satzes ist zweideutig. Denn es geht eben darum, ob nicht jede Literatur noch anderen Bedingungen des Verstehens unterliegt als denen, die in formaler Allgeneinheit jeden Text gegenuber erfüllt sein müssen."

[30] Braaten, op. cit., p. 135.

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to the later phases of Heidegger's work. Heinrich Ott, concerned with how the Word of God can be understood, has suggested a hermeneutic which centers on meaningful proclamation. Wolfhart Pannenberg has gone in a new direction, toward an analysis of history in an effort to solve the complex questions of hermeneutics.

The so-called "new hermeneutic", whose central expositors are Ebeling and Fuchs, defines hermeneutics as the theory of understanding how the Word of God which was once proclamation in the text moves into fresh proclamation, that is into the situation in which it can again produce faith. The accent falls upon the reality which is communicated in existential understanding. The Word of God, functioning hermeneutically, both removes obstacles to faith and engenders faith, as is the intention of the biblical text.[31] It is the oral character of the Word which is decisive, which produces faith, or authentic existence. Hence the new hermeneutic is really a theory about words and what happens as an event through words. For Ebeling, hermeneutics is the understanding of the Word of God becoming event again and again within the sphere of human language. He says: "Whatever precise theological definition may be given to the concept of the Word of God, at all events it points us to something that happens, viz. to the movement which leads from the text

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[31] John Dillenberger, "On Broadening the New Hermeneutic", in Robinson & Cobb, eds., The New Hermeneutic, p. 148.

of holy scripture to the sermon...."[32] And "Whatever precise definition may be given to hermeneutics...it has to do with the word-event."[33] Whereas Bultmann wants to probe beneath the language of the Bible to the understanding of human existence which it enshrines, Ebeling sees the language itself as the voice of being. "The primary phenomenon in the realm of understanding", he maintains, "is not understanding _of_ language, but understanding _through_ language."[34] Fuchs also is concerned with language and describes man as a linguistic creature who answers the call of being. This call is heard by man through history, for history is basically the history of language, of being coming to expression through language. The coming of the Word of God is the coming of authentic language, the language of love in Jesus. Jesus himself is the "language event", and he teaches us the language of faith and encourages us to try out this language ourselves in order that we may become familiar with God.[35] Hence with Fuchs there is a renewed interest in the historical Jesus. In both Fuchs and Ebeling there is an attempt to find an authentic language through which the Word of God can express itself as an event producing faith, and to avoid a counterfeit language which objectifies man and which

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[32] _Op. cit._, p. 311.

[33] _Ibid._, p. 313.

[34] _Ibid._, p. 318. See also Robinson & Cobb, eds., _The New Hermeneutic_, p. 93.

[35] Ernst Fuchs, "The New Testament and the Hermeneutical Problem" in Robinson & Cobb, eds., _The New Hermeneutic_, p. 141. See also Ernst Fuchs, _Hermeneutik_, Bad Cannstatt, 1954, pp. 126-134 & 265-271.

becomes an obstacle to faith.

In the new hermeneutic, language has become the key to understanding the biblical text rather than the interpreter's relationship to the subject of the text as in Bultmann. But should language itself be singled out as the only legitimate medium of the biblical revelation? What, for example, happens to history as a means of God's self-disclosure? Once again it would appear that the content of the kerygma as an object of faith has been obscured. There is little recognition that the crucifixion and resurrection as historic events were themselves creative of language, not merely "language events". Language as the only hermeneutical guide fails to do full justice to history. Neither will it do more than a small part of the hermeneutical task of spanning the years which lie between the redemptive events and contemporary life, for this comes to us in many non-verbal ways, e.g. the sacraments.

We turn now to a slightly different formulation of hermeneutics in the theology of Heinrich Ott. For Ott, the hermeneutical issue is one of finding a mediating position among Barth, Heidegger and Bultmann. As a student of and successor to Karl Barth, he has inherited the emphasis on the Word of God as clarified in dogmatics for the task of preaching. But the problem for Ott is how the Word of God is able to be understood in its proclamation. To this end he proposes that theology must turn more toward the human realm, to

man's situation. From Heidegger and Bultmann, Ott finds the direction for this turn. In Heidegger he discovers and appropriates an ontology of human existence and language, and from Bultmann he receives an impetus to shape his hermeneutic toward man himself to whom the Word of God must be existentially meaningful. Ott works out the implications of these influences on his thought in his book Theology and Preaching[36] where he struggles with the problem of how dogmatics is able to facilitate the movement from the Bible to preaching. He is concerned to show how genuine preaching is possible today. By genuine preaching he means proclamation which enables the biblical message to be understood in terms of human existence. He employs the figure of the "hermeneutical arch" to describe the total process of understanding.[37] The arch stretches between the biblical text and the sermon. In between exegesis and homiletics stand dogmatics to clarify the subject matter of the text and philosophy to help shed light on the concrete existence of men today. Thus preaching, built on the foundation of theology and ontology, is able to answer the real existential concern of man. At this point, he would appear to be breaking from Barth and moving closer to Bultmann's existential hermeneutic. Yet he acknowledges the danger of allowing a philosophical

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[36] Theology and Preaching, London, 1965.

[37] Heinrich Ott, "What is Systematic Theology?" in Robinson & Cobb, eds., The Later Heidegger and Theology, pp. 78-80.

point of view to determine the scope and content of the dogmatic formulation of the gospel.

Wolfhart Pannenberg attempts to find a solution to the hermeneutical questions in terms of world history. He defines the hermeneutic problem as how a given content can be repeated in a completely changed situation. As he asks it: "How can the distance between the past of the texts and the present of the interpreter be bridged?"[38] In that the modern historical method of exegesis requires us to interpret Scripture in light of its original intention, we are gradually made more conscious of the distance which separates us from the text. The solution, he argues, lies in the concept of merging horizons, a notion which is developed by Gadamer.[39] This concept involves the enlargement of the intellectual horizon of understanding of the interpreter to such an extent that it can also include the horizon of understanding of the text. The gap between our horizon and that of the text must be spanned without either being effaced. Whereas Liberalism tended to swallow the past in the present and Orthodoxy is inclined to ignore the present by emphasizing the past, a concept is needed which will give an overarching perspective. Neither does Pannenberg think

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[38] Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Crisis of the Scripture Principle in Protestant Theology," Dialog, Vol. 2 (Autumn, 1963), 312.

[39] E. g. Gadamer, op. cit., p. 289. "Vielmehr ist Verstehen immer der Vorgang der Verschmelzung solcher vermeintlich für sich seiender Horizonte."

that Bultmann's demythologizing or Bonhoeffer's non-religious interpretation is adequate. In both theology loses its object and ceases to be theology. It is only Universalgeschichte which serves as an adequate perspective.[40] As Pannenberg says:

> Thus the present situation may be related to that of early Christianity in terms of that horizon which alone connects both without blurring their differences, namely: the horizon of the historical process. The hermeneutical differences between the traditional texts and our present time would be at once respected and superseded in a concept of history connecting both, if this history can again be regarded as the work of the biblical God.[41]

The key of course is in the last phrase which describes history as God's unfolding plan for the world. One must speak of God in relation to reality as a whole, and not limit His domain. The biblical God is one true God who must be seen in relation to universal history as the ultimate horizon of reality. Universal history can bridge the distance between the time of Jesus and the twentieth century, and make possible a solution to the hermeneutical problem.[42]

IV. Concluding Observations:

What may we learn about our theme from this survey of

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[40] See Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Hermeneutik und Universalgeschichte," in Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche, 60 (1963), 90-121.

[41] "The Crisis of the Scripture Principle", p. 312.

[42] Ibid., p. 313.

contemporary hermeneutical options? We have observed that preunderstanding is always present in the interpretation of the Christian faith. Invariably hermeneutics proceeds from some "horizon of understanding". In fact it would appear that there is a general agreement that some clearly articulated hermeneutical approach, i.e. a self-consciously chosen preunderstanding, is an essential ingredient in interpretation if understanding of the text is to be facilitated.

More particularly, we have noticed that certain qualities in the interpreter have been suggested as necessary for a sound interpretation. For example, he must have empathy and rapport with the author of the historical document (Schleiermacher and Dilthey); he must be open and listening (Ebeling and Fuchs); and he must have a living relation to the message of the text (Bultmann). In other words, the interpreter's preunderstanding must consist of an appropriate body of assumptions and attitudes if an accurate knowledge of the text is to be achieved.

Now the question is: Is there a general preunderstanding which, if held by the interpreter, supplies him with the minimum prerequisite assumptions and attitudes? Is there a foundational preunderstanding within which a person must work to adequately interpret the Christian faith? We would again point to the biblical contention that it is faith which is this broad ideological and attitudinal frame of reference. The man of faith has a certain amount of ideological affinity with the authors of the biblical records

in that he shares with them a common belief in the subject (God) about whom they speak. The man of faith has a living relation to the message of the text in that he believes that he stands in relationship to the One to whose word the text testifies. And the man of faith possesses (or should possess) an open and attentive attitude in relation to the message of the texts, believing that they somehow contain or point to the revelation of God. In short, faith as a body of particular assumptions and attitudes is the preunderstanding necessary for an adequate interpretation of the Christian revelation.

This is not to say that merely because a person has faith he will be a competent interpreter. Possession of faith is in no way a guarantee of sound interpretation. Certain other skills and training are of course required in addition to a healthily functioning faith. Nor are we saying that all interpreters who have faith will come to the same conclusions. Faith is rather a minimum requirement within which a number of conclusions may be reached depending on the interpreter's background and the orientation of his specific hermeneutical position. The man who stands outside of faith, however, is out of rapport with the subject to be interpreted. Inevitably he will impose a preunderstanding onto the subject which is alien to it and which will result in a distorted interpretation.[43]

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[43] This is of course a statement of faith. One who stands outside of faith could make the same charge to the believer.

We have one final concluding observation to make from our survey of contemporary hermeneutical options. With only a few exceptions (most notably Pannenberg) these men tend to deemphasize history (as it is commonly understood) as the milieu of God's self-disclosure. The psychological hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, the existential hermeneutics of Bultmann and Ott, and the linguistic hermeneutics of Ebeling and Fuchs offer a less than significant place to history as the avenue along which God has made Himself known. Of course they are interested in history,[44] especially that which surrounds the Christ-event. Here it is more a question of emphasis. Staying within our own declared preunderstanding, we would affirm that the central message of the Bible is that God has made Himself known on the plane of history and centrally so in Jesus Christ. It follows that any hermeneutic which takes its cue from scripture must deal with the concept of revelation in history, a concept we shall consider in our next chapter.

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[44] Bultmann is particularly interested in history, but not history as it is ordinarily understood. His concern is with the history of the individual, not with past events.

Chapter Three

Revelation and History

I. The Issue: History

We have seen that preunderstanding is always present in some form in the interpretation of the Christian faith. Our task now is to examine the unique problems this poses for the interpreter as he turns to the foundational tenet of the Christian faith, God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.[1]

The pivotal issue in our examination of the role of preunderstanding in the interpretation of God's self-disclosure is the relation of revelation and history. Whereas other religious traditions have sought knowledge of God in mystical and rational experience or in nature, the biblical faith has found revelation centered primarily in certain historical events, chief of which is the coming of Christ.[2] This understanding of revelation has involved the Christian theologian in the complex task of interpreting history. It is in this effort that the role of preunderstanding is of crucial importance to the church's theological endeavor. But before we deal directly with the role of preunderstanding in historical interpretation, we must first make some effort to examine the claim that revelation is in some sense tied to

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[1] See above, p. 27.

[2] William Hordern, New Directions in Theology: Introduction, Philadelphia, 1966, pp. 55-56. Note: The way in which we employ the term "history" will be given a full explanation in Chapter Four.

history. This is necessary because, as an adjustment to biblical criticism of the last two centuries, much of Protestant theology has attempted to shift the ground of revelation from objective historical footing to subjective experience. Some theologians have suggested that the facts of biblical history do not matter so much for the life of faith as does our subjective understanding of Jesus. It has been argued that anthropology, not history, should be the primary concern of Christian thinkers. This argument certainly contains a part of the truth, for there is more to the biblical faith than mere historical fact. A purely historical approach cannot prove that an event has value for the life of faith. And of course relationship with God is essentially subjective and personal. But to divorce such subjective experience from its objective basis is to deny the heart of the biblical witness. As H. D. Lewis has pointed out: "If the conclusion is reached that no reliance can be placed at any point on Biblical accounts of alleged historical events, it becomes hard to see how the specific affirmations made about the work and person of Jesus can be justified."[3] It is our contention that the Jesus who actually lived in Palestine is at the center of God's revelatory activity and that he gives faith its objective base and supplies its content. Hence our purpose in this chapter is to show how any view of revelation

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[3] Philosophy of Religion, London, 1965, p. 236.

which places Jesus at the center of God's self-disclosure must take his history and consequently historical interpretation seriously. Perhaps the best way to do this is to survey the way the doctrine of revelation has been dealt with by representative theological positions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This will enable us to see why it is that "history" is the critical issue. We will then be in a position to move on to an analysis of the role of preunderstanding in historical interpretation.

II. The Increased Emphasis on Revelation and History

Roman Catholicism and Protestant Orthodoxy have broken very little with the historic conception of Scripture as the unified web of revealed truth. Both root revelation in the historical appearance of Jesus, yet their positions have the tendency to avoid the real complexities of historical interpretation by stressing that these events have been given an infallible interpretation by an inspired prophet or apostle. Both views see the Bible as the written Word of God and assert that it contains clear cut propositions about the Christ-event and other doctrinal matters which can be rationally discerned. Hence the answers about what happened in the history surrounding the revelatory events are already in. Historical investigation may fill in the background, but not change the conclusions. While being miles apart on many other issues, these two groups have in common this positing of propositional revelation as contained in Scripture.[4]

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[4] John Hick, Philosophy of Religion, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1963, p. 61.

For the Catholic, what is not revealed by the light of nature or rational knowledge comes from God by direct "communication delivered for our belief"[5], and is maintained intact by the tradition of the church. It is true that some modern Catholic theologians have given more emphasis to historical "event" as a mode of revelation, but they still fall back on "revealed dogma" as the primary locus of our knowledge of God.[6]

Protestant Orthodoxy, even in the stiff winds of biblical criticism, continues to identify the words of Scripture with God's revealing Word.[7] Edward J. Carnell, a leading spokesman for the conservative wing of the church, has defined "orthodoxy as that branch of Christendom which limits the ground of religious authority to the Bible."[8] He argues that in the Bible, and the Bible only, do we have the Word of God written, and this written word is the propositional revelation of Christ's will.[9] Further, he maintains that "only propositional revelation can clarify the state of the sinner before a holy God."[10] Carnell is careful to point out that Jesus Christ is the central revelation of God, and that "to conceive of the

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5 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, IV, Ch. 1, quoted by John Baillie, The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought, London, 1956, p. 4.

6 See e.g. Hans Küng, The Structures of the Church, London, 1964 and Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations: More Recent Readings, Vol. IV, London, 1967.

7 See Carl F. H. Henry, ed., Revelation and the Bible, London, 1959 and James I. Packer, Fundamentalism and the Word of God, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1958.

8 The Case for Orthodox Theology, Philadelphia, 1959, p. 13.

9 Ibid., pp. 34 ff.

10 Ibid., p. 140.

Bible as the primary revelation is heresy"[11], yet by postulating biblical inerrancy, he evades the real problem of historical interpretation. Thus both Roman Catholicism and Protestant Orthodoxy, while anchoring revelation firmly to history, have nevertheless found it possible to stay on the edges of the difficult question of the interpretation of history by equating revelation with Scripture or with Scripture and tradition.

Yet this sort of conclusion hardly solves the problem. Historical questions cannot be so easily pushed aside. In fact since the rise of biblical criticism, few Christians have been able to make so easy an identification of God's Word with the written words of Scripture. In Protestant theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there has been a continuous search for a category of experience which would get to the root of revelation buried beneath the layers of tradition documented in Scripture. The Protestant theologian has asked the question of revelation in a much more radical way than the Catholic, who, in Vatican II, continued to debate over the sources of revelation--whether all of revelation was contained in Scripture, or whether tradition was also a source. But the Protestant has asked with some intensity: Where can revelation be found at all if one cannot equate it with Scripture?

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[11] Ibid., p. 49.

Not only the rise of historical criticism but also Kant's rejection of natural theology and his emphasis on epistemology in his critiques has pushed the concept of revelation to the forefront of theological discussion. Nearly every modern theology has first established itself as a theology of revelation, assuming that the concept of revelation is the most comprehensive expression of the uniqueness of the Christian faith.[12] It is interesting to note that the term "revelation" has acquired this centrality and importance only within the last century, and that the church up until that time found other categories in which to express its faith.[13] Some have argued that the concept of revelation has been given far more significance than it merits, and that other categories (e.g. reconciliation) are better suited to describe the essence of Christian faith.[14] One author has specifically questioned whether Christianity has a revelation at all and others on the "frontline" of theological change have preferred to theologize in other frameworks.[15] Yet on the whole it has been difficult in modern theology not to begin by answering the question, "how do you know?" (which modern man's heightened epistemological concern forces him to ask) with either some

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[12] Braaten, op. cit., p. 12.

[13] John McIntyre, The Christian Doctrine of History, London, 1957, p. 2.

[14] E. g. Paul Althaus, "Die Inflation des Begriffs der Offenbarung in der gegenwärtigen Theologie," Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie, 18 (1941), 134-149.

[15] F. Gerald Downing, Has Christianity a Revelation, London, 1964. See also Dean Peerman, ed., Frontline Theology, London, 1967.

statement regarding revelation or at least a declared allegiance to the uniqueness of Jesus as the revealer of God.

The concept of revelation which is at the center of contemporary theology reflects modern man's historical and epistemological sensitivity. In contrast to the theologians of the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment who saw revelation either in reason or in direct communication from God, the modern theologian invariably links revelation to history in some manner. Prior to the nineteenth century there was "little appreciation of revelation mediated through successive situations in history."[16] But the modern theologian, it appears, must bring his view of revelation under the scrutiny of an age which has a sharpened historical consciousness. Characteristically, Reinhold Niebuhr asserts that "the Christian faith begins with, and is founded upon, the affirmation that the life, death and resurrection of Christ represent an event in history...."[17] The category of history has become essential for any theology which postulates that the eternal God has revealed Himself in Christ. "History has become our fate", says Carl Braaten, "and, like it or not, theology will persist in correlating history with revelation in one way or another."[18] But before we examine current

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16. Alan Richardson, History Sacred and Profane, London, 1964, p. 65.

17. Faith and History, London, 1949, p. 26.

18. Op. cit., p. 20.

views of revelation and history, it would be well to go back to the nineteenth century for the beginning of the story.

III. Revelation and History in the Nineteenth Century

In 1793 Immanuel Kant published Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone and left as a legacy for the nineteenth century three options for revelation: (1) Naturalism which denies the supernatural revelation of God; (2) Rationalism which accepts historical revelation, but as only a preparatory step to the religion of reason; and (3) Supernaturalism which maintains the need for a religion revealed in a supernatural way.[19] Nineteenth century theology was heavily influenced by Kant, and struggled in large measure to free itself from the confines of these three possibilities. The effort at emancipation took essentially two forms, although there were many variations. We shall look briefly at the most influential figures of each of these two responses to Kant's challenge.

One direction which the nineteenth century turned was toward subjective religious experience, and here the name of Friedrich Schleiermacher is most important. Although he devoted little more than a postscript to discussing revelation,[20] his whole theological system has direct bearing on it. Schleiermacher, influenced as he was by Kant and German pietism, turned his attention on man as the knowing

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[19] Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, New York, 1960, p. 143, quoted by Braaten, op. cit., p. 18.

[20] The Christian Faith, New York, 1963, Vol. I, pp. 49-50.

and feeling subject. Man, he argued, is more than just a rational and moral being, as Kant had said, but also a religious being whose highest religious experience is the feeling of absolute dependence on God. From this starting point he proceeds to examine what he calls man's religious consciousness as he finds it expressed in the Christian community. He discovers by his inductive investigation that man, whose religious consciousness has not been awakened, is in bondage to the "flesh" and stands in need of redemption. Man needs to be liberated to realize his true dependence on God. It is Jesus, as the perfect embodiment of a religious consciousness completely open to God, who becomes the redeemer. Jesus, as the supreme archetype of man's religious consciousness, secures man's salvation. The memory of Jesus, hallowed within the religious community, has efficacious influence.[21] The significant point to note for our purpose is that Schleiermacher rests revelation "neither on authoritatively communicated truths nor on truths excogitated by the speculative reason but on...the religious self-consciousness of the community."[22] Schleiermacher sees within the experience of man the source of revelation, and this determines his basic theological conclusions. His anthropocentric presuppositions do not allow him to give primacy to history as the milieu where the event of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ takes place. Jesus is a

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[21] Ibid., Vol. II, pp. 478-480.

[22] Baillie, op. cit., p. 12.

perfect man but not the Word which has become flesh. But even though Schleiermacher finds "revelation" in the religious self-consciousness of the community, he cannot altogether escape linking revelation and history. The point where they inevitably intersect is in Jesus, who, as the supreme archetype of man's religious consciousness and therefore a revelatory figure, can only be known to us "through" history.

A second response to Kant's options came in the form of Hegel's historical pantheism. Hegel, taking his cue from Herder's historicism, locates revelation securely in history which he defines as the process where the infinite Spirit comes to consciousness in the finite. Through the dialectical process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis God comes to self-realization. As with Schleiermacher, Hegel argues that man's grasp of this divine truth of God's self-realization comes through his religious consciousness. But the apprehension is in the form of images which confuse symbol with reality, and it is the task of rational philosophy to translate these inadequate images into concepts, purging them of their merely imaginative and symbolic character. Jesus in such a framework becomes the symbol which enshrines the idea that divinity and humanity are one in essence, a necessary feature of Hegel's historical pantheism, rather than the unique once for all and absolute revelation of God in history. In Hegel's thought the biblical emphasis

is largely vitiated,[23] but revelation remains tied to history.

Given these two options as possible ways of overcoming the hegemony of eighteenth century rationalism, nineteenth century theologians vacillated between them. Schleiermacher's thought can be detected in varying degrees in the work of Ritschl, Herrmann, Harnack and Bousset. Following Hegel's lead were David Strauss, Ludwig Feuerbach, Alois Biedermann and Ernst Toeltsch. Schleiermacher's emphasis on man as the knowing subject opened up whole new avenues of theological reflection which continue in full force today, yet in his followers his theology of pious self-awareness degenerated into psychologism. The biblical historical drama became the victim of massive internalization. The value of Hegel's thought was his emphasis on progressive revelation expressing itself in the particulars of history, but its weakness, especially evident in his followers, was its destruction of the biblical revelation of God in Christ by absorbing it into historical pantheism.[24]

There were attempts by nineteenth century theologians to find a mediating point between the historical and psychological poles of religious knowledge. Many thought it was possible to validate the manifestation of God in history by uniting it with genuine religious experience. Martin Kähler and Adolph Schlatter suggested such an alternative in their theology. They argued that God's revelation ~~in~~

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[23] H. R. Mackintosh, Types of Modern Theology, London, 1937, pp. 102-116. Also see below, ch. 8.

[24] Braaten, op. cit., pp. 20-23.

history by uniting it with genuine religious experience. Martin Kähler and Adolph Schlatter suggested such an alternative in their theology. They argued that God's revelation in history must be accompanied by the word of interpretation. Both the acts and the words, the Tat-Wort, are part of the revelation. The only Jesus we know is the Jesus whom the biblical writers preached as the risen Christ who is Lord. They stressed both the objectivity and the suprahistorical character of the biblical Heilsgeschichte over against subjective religious experience and historical relativity.[25] Yet their efforts were not as fully appreciated in their own time as they would be a generation later. They were unable to stem the tides of historicism and subjectivism. The focus of theology had shifted to the theological liberalism of Harnack and the Religionsgeschichteschule of Troeltsch. Historical studies were testing the uniqueness of the Christian revelation and historical relativism had become the order of the day. All philosophical ideas, religious dogmas and moral imperatives seemed so historically conditioned or psychologically rooted that they were in danger of losing their authority. History and religious experience were proving to be difficult concepts in which to contain revelation.[26] H. Richard Niebuhr, commenting on the relativism from which he could find no escape, says that "no other influence has affected twentieth century thought more deeply than the

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[25] See Martin Kähler, The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historical Biblical Christ, Philadelphia, 1964.

[26] Braaten, op. cit., pp. 23-24.

discovery of spatial and temporal relativity."[27] These relativizing effects had produced a kind of theological ennui and the stage was set for theological change. The systematic study of one aspect of preunderstanding had sapped the vitality of the theological endeavor.

IV. Revelation and History in the Twentieth Century

The change had already been anticipated in a sort of prophetic fashion by Søren Kierkegaard who, in reaction to Hegel, began his discussion of revelation and history with the haunting question: "Is an historical point of departure possible for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure have any other than mere historical interest; is it possible to base an eternal happiness upon historical knowledge?"[28] The twentieth century rejected the notion that the personality of Jesus really could provide a solid historical foundation upon which the Christian faith could be established, as theologians of the Ritschlian period had thought.[29] The nineteenth century view of the Jesus of history, as Schweitzer had conclusively shown, was not the Jesus of the Bible.[30] The nineteenth century search for the historical Jesus had presupposed that the Gospel records were in large part the product of the early church's imagination

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[27] Op. cit., p. 7.

[28] Op. cit., p. iii.

[29] Richardson, op. cit., p. 123.

[30] Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, New York, 1948.

and theological speculation, but by applying the methods of historical criticism, they believed that one could locate the hard core of historical facts and uncover the real Jesus who would be the foundation of Christian faith.[31] But the rise of historical relativism had changed all this, and the new dialectical theologians were more inclined to echo Søren Kierkegaard's sentiment: "If the contemporary generation had left nothing behind them but these words: 'We have believed that in such and such a year God appeared among us in the humble figure of a servant, that he lived and taught in our community, and finally died', it would be more than enough."[32] Nineteenth century historiography, based on an immanentalist and evolutionary world view, stressing the liberal idea of progress and applying methods modelled after the natural sciences did not provide a solid foundation for revelation.

Twentieth century views of revelation have in varying degrees attempted to disengage Christian faith from the relativities of history without losing the historical dimension altogether or reverting to propositional revelation. Nearly all theologians have had to relate revelation to history in some fashion, but have tried to do so in a way which would free it from historical relativism. A survey of representative views of revelation will help us to see this trend more clearly.[33]

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[31] Hordern, op. cit., p. 51.

[32] Op. cit., p. 87.

[33] See James I. Packer, "Contemporary Views of Revelation", in Henry, ed., op. cit., pp. 99 ff.

Heading the list in terms of influence is of course Karl Barth, who in dramatic fashion broke away from his theological teachers, Herrmann and Harnack, and asserted that what man needed was an authentic Word from God, not the words of man. Barth maintained that the order of questions for theology must be determined by the framework given in divine revelation itself, not by one artificially imposed by man. His position is based on the idea that between God and man there exists an absolute gulf, and that man is totally ignorant of any knowledge of God. Divine revelation must create in man the capacity to receive it. Man's knowledge of God depends solely on the miracle of God's redeeming action in Christ who is the only bridge over the chasm. Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is the mediator of the knowledge of God.[34]

Revelation makes contact with man by virtue of the power of the Word of God. Revelation touches history as a tangent touches a circle, and provides the content of faith from above not from history below. The Jesus of history remains elusive but real. Barth describes him as "the Rabbi of Nazareth, historically so difficult to get information about, and when it is got, one whose activity is so easily a little commonplace alongside more than one founder of a

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[34] Alan Richardson, The Bible in the Age of Science, London, 1961, p. 93.

religion and alongside many later representatives of his own 'religion'."[35] Yet he is also

> the real and active revealer of God and Reconciler with God, because in Him, His Son or Word, God sets and gives to be known, not something, be it the greatest and most significant, but Himself exactly as He posits and knows Himself from eternity and in eternity.[36]

For Barth, revelation remains related to history, but is safely removed from its relativizing influences.

Emil Brunner also would place revelation "outside the circle in which human knowledge and human doctrine--acquired by man's own efforts--can move, and with which they are competent to deal. Knowledge of God exists only insofar as there is a self-disclosure, a self-manifestation of God, that is, insofar as there is a 'revelation'."[37] The Word has become flesh, the Eternal has entered into the sphere of historical fact, but faith alone, not historical science, can grasp it.[38] It is only by "personal encounter" or the "I-Thou relationship" that man knows God.

Bultmann, who as a form critic, saw even more clearly what he thought to be the dangers of basing revelation on a search for the historical Jesus. Revelation for Bultmann

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[35] Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, tr. by G. T. Thomson, Edinburgh, 1936, Vol. I/1, p. 188.

[36] Ibid., p. 476.

[37] Brunner, The Christian Doctrine of God, tr. by Olive Wyon, London, 1949, p. 14. See below, ch. 10.

[38] Brunner, The Mediator, tr. by Olive Wyon, London, 1934, p. 153.

rests on the insight that the Scriptures are confessional documents which witness to the saving act of God. They are not a series of revealed propositions or a body of dogma, but a testimony that the object of revelation is the living God. Revelation occurs in preaching (kerygma) when man encounters God Himself, and obeys God's Word in relation to his own existence. It follows that revelation comes to man in the present, not in the historical past.[39] Bultmann does "not deny that the resurrection kerygma is firmly rooted to the earthly figure of the crucified Jesus"[40] yet does not see how faith can derive any support from a historical inquiry concerning him. But Bultmann is careful to say that without the historical figure, there would be no kerygma.

Many contemporary theologians have not been content with so radical a separation of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Gerhard Ebeling, a disciple of Bultmann's, has attempted to root the Christian revelation more firmly in the historical appearance of Jesus Christ. Revelation "is primarily and properly a definite event--namely, the event attested in holy Scripture--which again, to define it still more closely and state its absolute peculiarity, is the appearance of Jesus Christ."[41] He maintains that Christianity

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39 H. P. Owen, "Revelation", in Kegley, ed., <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., pp. 42-44.

40 Bultmann, "Kerygma and Myth", in <u>Kerygma and Myth</u>, ed. by Hans Werner Bartsch, New York, 1961, p. 112.

41 Ebeling, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., p. 29.

stands or falls with its connection to its historical (historisch) origin, "for faith is manifestly not Christian faith if it does not have a basis in the historical Jesus himself."[42]

Reinhold Niebuhr also would anchor revelation solidly to history. He says: "The historical revelation is by no means simply the history of man's quest for God or the record of man's increasingly adequate definitions of God.... It is rather the record of those events in history in which faith discerns the self-disclosure of God."[43] The life and death of Christ are the revelation of God's character[44] and Christ is the final "Word" which God has spoken to man.[45] Also Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his lectures on Christology asserted that "this present-historical (geschichtliche) Christ is the same person as the historical (historische) Jesus of Nazareth. Were this not so, we would have to say with Paul that our faith is in vain and an illusion."[46] Even Paul Tillich, whose phenomenological analysis finds revelation in many sources, acknowledges that "Christianity claims to be based on the revelation of Jesus as the Christ as the final revelation."[47]

History has also been the primary category for under-

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42 Ibid., p. 204.
43 The Nature and Destiny of Man, New York, 1941, Vol. I, p. 136.
44 Ibid., p. 142.
45 Ibid., p. 67.
46 Christology, tr. by John Bowden, London, 1966, p. 71.
47 Op. cit., p. 147.

standing revelation among biblical theologians who conceive revelation as being a series of historical events in which God has acted redemptively.[48] The concern of this group has been to see revelation from the biblical point of view which is that history is the medium through which the eternal God has revealed Himself. The foundation for revelation is God's action in the history of Israel which reaches its culminating point in Jesus Christ.[49] This divine history (Heilsgeschichte) perceives God as coming within the orbit of man's experience by acting in human history.[50] The work of Christ upon the earth has cosmic implications because he is none other than God Himself in His self-revelation.[51] Revelation is not a body of revealed, propositional truths, but God addressing man in an "event" or "deed" which commits Him to man and which expresses His inner self.[52]

G. Ernest Wright says it straightforwardly when he asserts that "history is the chief medium of revelation."[53] Wright argues that biblical man saw himself as existing in a unique and specific history which had significance because God through it revealed Himself as the redeemer of all history.[54] God, for Wright, can only be described in relation to the

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48 McIntyre, The Christian Doctrine of History, p. 3.

49 Paul K. Jewett, "Special Revelation as Historical and Personal", in Henry, ed., op. cit., p. 46.

50 Hick, The Philosophy of Religion, p. 70.

51 Richardson, The Bible in the Age of Science, p. 134.

52 Donald D. Evans, op. cit., p. 14.

53 God Who Acts, London, 1952, p. 13.

54 Ibid., p. 42.

historical process. God's acts in history are the means by which God communicates with men. These events are made meaningful and interpreted by chosen heralds or messengers. Biblical revelation is history interpreted by faith.[55] Oscar Cullmann underlines the centrality of Christ in Heilsgeschichte. He writes:

> For although individual basic facts of this Biblical history are subject to historical investigation, and joining of events with the historical action of Jesus, it takes on meaning only when this central historical action of Jesus of Nazareth is recognized as absolute revelation to man.[56]

Hendrikus Berkhof finds the meaning of history in "the revelation of God in Israel and in Jesus Christ."[57] The Israelites came into contact with God as he changed events into history by His acts before them.[58] Jesus, living by and from the Old Testament, saw himself as the one in whom and around whom the crisis of history's fulfillment would take place.[59]

James Barr, a lone dissenting voice among biblical theologians, has pointed out that while history is a necessary category for revelation, it is not the only one and has in fact been overemphasized. He argues that positing history as the supreme milieu of God's revelation is more an apologetic effort to counter nineteenth century materialist,

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55 Ibid., p. 107.

56 Christ and Time, tr. by Floyd V. Filson, London, 1962, p. 22.

57 Christ the Meaning of History, London, 1966, p. 35.

58 Ibid., p. 37.

59 Ibid., p. 60.

skeptical and immanentalist philosophies[60] than it is a biblical category.[61] Barr argues that to make the concept of history mandatory and central for revelation involves one in contradictions and antinomies. As an example he points out that history, for the Heilsgeschichte theologians, is both the milieu in which God acted and the field which can be described by human historical science. "Thus", he concludes, "it is a real difficulty in many views centered in a revelation history that, in spite of a primary assertion of God's actions in history, they come to have their actual centre in historical emphasis, or a historical way of thinking, or a historical form of self-understanding or perception of life rather than in actual history."[62] According to Barr, history is redefined and the biblical material is divided up arbitrarily to fit the theological system. Yet even Barr accepts the fact that "the biblical evidence, and the evidence of the Old Testament in particular, fits with and supports the assertion that "history" is the absolutely supreme milieu of God's revelation."[63]

Even those theologians who have a more philosophical orientation have given primacy to history in discussing revelation. William Temple, stressing the personal quality of the supreme and ultimate Reality which is God, affirms

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60 James Barr, "Revelation through History in the Old Testament and in Modern Theology", Interpretation, 17 (1963), 195.

61 Barr, Old and New, p. 69.

62 Ibid., p. 67.

63 "Revelation through History", p. 193.

that all existence is a medium of revelation.[64] It follows that there is no such thing as a specific revealed truth concerning God, but rather what is offered in revelation is the living God Himself.[65] But history becomes important in Temple's view when he makes it clear that such an offering was made to us in the historical personage of Jesus Christ.

John Baillie, continuing in the same line, maintains that "revelation consists neither in the dictation of writings nor in the communincation of information but in personal communion--the self-disclosure of Personality."[66] The revelation which the Bible describes is one of personal relationship which can only be given by God through a person. Jesus Christ, the Incarnate One, is such a person and in him "all other revelation is comprehended and summed up."[67] Jesus is the event through which man can comprehend God's revelation.

History and revelation have been linked in one other significant way in recent thought in the theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg. For Pannenberg, revelation comes not in or through history, but as history.[68] To sever the kerygma from what really happened in history is to cut faith off from its source, for the kerygma is the declaration of God's acts in the affairs of men. The Heilsgeschichte theologians, according

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64 Nature, Man and God, London, 1934, p. 306.
65 Ibid., p. 322.
66 Our Knowledge of God, London, 1939, p. 37. See also The Sense of the Presence of God, London, 1962, passim.
67 Baillie, The Idea of Revelation, p. 80.
68 Pannenberg, ed., Offenbarung als Geschichte, Göttingen, 1961.

to Pannenberg, failed to show how revelation and history are really connected. Revelation, he argues, does not exist above history, entering in from outside, but is present in universal history for anyone who has eyes to see. This motif of revelation as a universal historical process has been accused of being a relapse into Hegelianism[69] but Pannenberg is conscious of avoiding the dangers inherent in Hegelian pantheism, and preserving the uniqueness of God's self-disclosure in Jesus.[70] His concern is to overcome the cleavage between salvation history and world history by placing revelation within the universal historical process.[71]

V. History as the Uniting Theme

The central conclusion which comes from this brief survey of modern views of revelation is that history is an inescapable category for revelation. "It remains true", says H. Richard Niebuhr, "that Christian faith cannot escape partnership with history, however many other partners it may choose."[72] In fact some statement of revelation in, through or as history may be, as James Barr has pointed out, the one unifying factor in modern theology and biblical scholarship.[73] All who see Jesus as central in God's

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69 E.g. Lothar Steiger, "Offenbarungsgeschichte und theologische Vernunft", Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche, 59 (1962), 93.

70 See Pannenberg, Jesus: God and Man, Philadelphia, 1968, pp. 115 ff.

71 Carl Braaten, "The New Controversy on Revelation", The Journal of Religion, Vol. XLV, 3 (1965).

72 Op. cit., p. 59.

73 "Revelation through History", p. 193.

redemptive activity, whatever other distinctive theological emphases they may have, must figure out some way to span the two thousand years which ultimately forces them into the problem of historical interpretation. The real issue, it appears, is the "use and abuse of history." So now we must turn to the role of preunderstanding in historical interpretation.

Chapter Four

Preunderstanding and Historical Method

I. The Problem: The Presence of Preunderstanding in Historical Interpretation

We have observed the ubiquitous presence of preunderstanding in its various forms, and paid particular attention to its role in hermeneutics which we described as the science of how a word or an event of the past can be comprehended and made meaningful in the present. We then turned to the Christian concept of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, noting the close relationship between revelation and history. Our task now is to examine the function of preunderstanding in historical interpretation. The development of our theme so far may be summarized in the following propositions:

A. Preunderstanding is present in any apprehension and interpretation of reality.

B. It is self-consciously present in the systematic interpretation of the Christian revelation commonly referred to as hermeneutics.

C. The Christian affirms that the self-disclosure of God has taken place in history and uniquely so in the person of Jesus Christ.

D. It follows that since the Christian conceives of revelation as being closely tied to history, to adequately interpret that revelation, he must carefully consider the

relationship of preunderstanding to historical study.

It is proposition D which we must now attempt to unravel, analyzing its many implications.

There is now a general acceptance by historians that preunderstanding is an ever present factor in historical interpretation. Beyond the bare facts which are the mere skeleton of history, historical writing inevitably proceeds from some point of view. This hardly needs extensive substantiation. Historians know that they cannot divorce the doing of history from life as it is seen and experienced. Carl Becker, for example, accepts a form of preunderstanding as a historical fact of life. He says:

> It must then be obvious that living history, the ideal series of events that we affirm and hold in memory, since it is so initially associated with what we are doing and with what we hope to do, cannot be precisely the same for all at any given time, or the same for one generation as for another.[1]

Allan Nevins, in a discussion of the problems of historical interpretation, recognizes "that historians can only present a number of varying theories, each supported by more or less plausible evidence."[2] It goes without saying that one of the determining factors on which a theory is chosen is the historian's prior assumptions and attitudes.

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[1] Op. cit., p. 242.

[2] The Gateway to History, Garden City, New York, 1962, p. 228.

II. The Implications of the Problem for the Interpretation of the Christian Faith

To get at the implications of this general acceptance of preunderstanding in historical interpretation for interpreting the Christian revelation, it would be well to start at the beginning and see how the word "history" has been variously defined and used.[3] At least four possibilities come to mind. First, history is a word which is often used to describe what has happened. To describe something as historical is to distinguish it from the realm of make-believe. Myths, legends and fiction are not said to be historical. History describes an actual series of events that once occurred. To say this or that is historical is to say that if we had been there with a television camera, we would have been able to catch a sequence of events on film. History in this sense of the term refers only to those events or that series of events which constitute the minimum core of factuality. It only asserts "happenedness", not meaning. There is, therefore, when history is defined at this level, no actual interpretation to be influenced by preunderstanding. That there was a series of events in which Jesus was the central figure is all that can be said when history is understood at this level.

Second, the term is used in a more restrictive sense to describe only those events which we affirm and hold in memory. History comes to mean not simply what happened, but the significant events that happened. We use the term "historic"

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[3] Hordern, op. cit., pp. 63-72.

to describe these events. To judge an event as historic is already to move into the area of interpretation and to see the potential for one's preunderstanding to be an influence. This kind of history is relative, and varies in response to the influence of preunderstanding and the increase and refinement of knowledge. The historic, as opposed to that which merely happened, is that which is still alive for the historian, history in which the interpreter finds meaning for himself. It should be noted that the historic is not to be separated from type one, for people can only remember what actually happened. The history of Jesus may be said to be historic in that it is judged to be so by the believing, i.e. it gives meaning to their lives, and it is remembered because it actually happened.

Still a third way in which the word "history" is used is to describe the work of the professional historian. History for the historian is an inquiry into the "actions of human beings that have been done in the past,"[4] "the science of men in time,"[5] "the memory of things said and done."[6] Such a task is not simply a discovery of facts, but an interpretation of the facts based on evidence. The interpretation categorizes the facts, weighs their significance and relates them to each other meaningfully. In this

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[4] R. G. Collingwood, The Idea of History, London, 1946, p. 9.
[5] Marc Bloch, The Historian's Craft, Manchester, 1954, p. 27.
[6] Becker, op. cit., p. 235.

responsibility the historian becomes both an artist and a scientist. He is an artist in that he deals with the unique, with events which cannot be repeated for observation, and because he is personally involved in the creative task of reproducing the past in meaningful form. He is a scientist insofar as he does not allow his own prejudices to cloud his judgment regarding the evidence, but allows the evidence as far as possible to speak its own truth. Here again the preunderstanding of the historian will have an important role to play both as a more or less unconscious influence in terms of his environmental conditioning and as a conscious influence in terms of his understanding of and approach to history. It will certainly make a difference in the interpretation of the whole complex of events surrounding the life of Jesus.

Finally, the term history is often employed in describing a particular conception of historical causality which rules out any event which is not explainable in terms of presently known laws of nature and psychology. As many have pointed out, this position is itself a metaphysical one. It has its roots in eighteenth century attempts to wed scientific and historical epistemology. It is this usage of the term "history", built on a particular preunderstanding, which we believe the Christian must challenge if he is to maintain that God has made Himself known in history in the person of Jesus Christ. This problem we must consider in some detail.

III. The Positivist Challenge

In order to see more clearly the questions which this "positivist" view of history poses for the assertions of faith, it would be well to place the problem in historical perspective. While this cannot be done in detail here, and has been treated adequately elsewhere,[7] it is nevertheless important to sketch some generalizations which will guide us in our present discussion.

In the Middle Ages there was little historical awareness as we know it today. History was carefully divided into sacred and profane, and it was a matter of citing authoritative sources to establish a historical truth. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw little change as the medieval view of history continued its unchallenged reign. In these centuries, history was little more than the handmaid of philosophical and polemical writing. Men looked for progress in knowledge toward the mathematical and philosophical sciences and away from history which appeared to be beyond the possibility of verification. Lessing's (1729-1781) often quoted statement in his _Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft_ epitomized the era: "Incidental truths of history can never become the proofs of necessary truths of reason."[8] The "ugly ditch" between the accidental truths of history and the necessary truths of reason could not be leaped.

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7 See e. g. Richardson, _History Sacred and Profane_.

8 Henry Chadwick, ed., _Lessing's Theological Writings_, London, 1956, p. 53.

In the nineteenth century there came a gradual break with authoritative tradition and a general rejection of the classical outlook of the whole medieval scheme of world chronology. The change in outlook had many roots and causes, two of which we will mention. First, historical thinking was given intellectual footage by the Enlightenment which provided a point of view critical of the traditional teaching of the church, a necessary advance if history was to proceed out of the medieval world view. To the intellectual stimulus provided by the Enlightenment, one might also add the changes on the human scene, and in particular the industrial revolution as a cause for the change in historical thinking. Alan Richardson remarks that "the first half of the nineteenth century had witnessed a greater change in the human scene than had ever taken place in the whole span of recorded history...."[9] A new outlook upon man's history and potential came as a natural sequence as new machines replaced hand-operated tools. It was inevitable that the dramatic changes in man's way of life would affect his concept of history. Bernhard Lohse underlines the significance of the revolution in historical thinking by arguing that "the rise of historical thinking is one of the greatest movements in the intellectual history of mankind."[10]

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[9] The Bible in the Age of Science, p. 47.

[10] A Short History of Christian Doctrine, tr. by Ernest Stoeffler, Philadelphia, 1966, p. 226.

In the nineteenth century western man became historically minded as he had become scientifically minded in the seventeenth century. An amazing effort at historical activity began. Historians sought, under the aphorism of Leopold von Ranke who became Professor of History at Berlin in 1825: "*wie es eigentlich gewesen*--as it really happened,"[11] facts for their own sake. History became "scientific" in both its methods and tools. Yet with all their effort in the disinterested pursuit of facts, the nineteenth century historians did not entirely succeed in emancipating themselves from a preunderstanding which they inherited from their rationalist predecessors. In the first place, these historians were inclined to view past history, not from the perspective of the era in question, but from their own era. A smug superiority about nineteenth century culture gave them little appreciation for previous eras and clouded their judgment. Secondly, they viewed history largely through the twin-lensed spectacles of rationalism and progress. Perfection was the goal of mankind and reasoned science was the means by which it could be achieved. Finally, nineteenth century historiography hitched its epistemological wagon to the star of the natural sciences. According to this positivist view of history, historical facts could be scientifically ascertained and arranged into a pattern of general laws

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[11] These words appear in Ranke's *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker, 1494-1534*, quoted by Richardson, *History Sacred and Profane*, p. 104.

concerning human behavior.[12]

These presuppositions of historical understanding inevitably affected the interpretation of the New Testament, and were particularly influential in what has come to be called the "Life of Jesus Movement". The underlying assumption in this movement was that the personality of Jesus could provide a solid historical foundation and guarantee the truth of his teaching on the Kingdom of God. The first century legends could be stripped away, leaving the authentic Jesus. The ironic element was that these "scientific" biographies of Jesus differed so widely in their views that it became obvious that their various authors were reflecting their own preunderstandings in the accounts. This whole nineteenth century effort failed "because it became alarmingly and terrifyingly evident how inevitably each author brought the spirit of his own age into his presentation of the figure of Jesus."[13]

Twentieth century theologians, influenced by the positivist conception of history, saw that the historical Jesus was an insecure shelf on which to lay their faith.[14] The "neo-orthodox" theologians, led by Karl Barth, attempted in their various ways to disengage Christian faith from the relativities of history. Both Barth and Emil Brunner posited a

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[12] Collingwood, op. cit., pp. 126 ff.

[13] Günther Bornkamm, Jesus of Nazareth, tr. by Irene and Fraser McLusky with James M. Robinson, London, 1960, p. 13.

[14] A more thorough and careful study of this point will be made in Chapter Ten.

realm of super-history where the events of the gospel have taken place, and hence freed them from the skeptical scrutiny of historians. Paul Tillich developed his conception of Christ as "the center of history" which is given credence, not by historical verification, but by the meaning which it gives to our lives. Bultmann sought to interpret the Christ-event existentially, freeing it from its historical ground. What all these views have in common, although there is much on which they disagree, is their uncritical acceptance of the nineteenth century view of history and of the naturalistic presuppositions of the historical critical method. They did not radically challenge the inherent preunderstanding on which this view rests, but assumed it and were driven off the plane of history as a ground for revelation. The result was a divorce between faith and historical knowledge, a position which appears contradictory if one maintains that history is the milieu of God's self-disclosure. So we are left with the problem of how to overcome this contradiction.

To get at a possible solution, it is necessary for us to examine the naturalistic presuppositions of the historical critical method to see if they are necessary to its operation. Is it possible to reconcile modern historiography with a faith which affirms God's activity in history?

Along with others, David Hume helped to establish the traditional pattern for an exclusion of God's intervention in history to be treated as a factor in historical explanation.[15]

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[15] See Antony Flew, God and Philosophy, London, 1966, pp. 145 ff.

He argued that the criteria which we use to evaluate historical testimony and the general assumptions which make it possible for us to analyze historical evidence rule out any possibility of establishing on purely historical grounds that a miraculous event has occurred. Hume made his case in three propositions: (1) The present documents of the past cannot be handled as historical evidence at all unless we presume that the same basic regularities held then as hold today; (2) The historian, in trying to determine what in fact happened, must utilize as criteria all his present knowledge of what is probable or improbable, possible or impossible; (3) Since God's intervention (miracle) is defined in terms of practical impossibility, the application of these criteria precludes the possibility of a "supernatural" event.

While each of these propositions has the overtone of self-evident truth about it, it is questionable if they hold for history as well as they do for science. Proposition one, for example, rules out any possibility for the unique to occur in history. But there is a sense in which history is full of the unique. Freemman, with his creative energies, and new combinations of forces continually produce historical "events" which are novel. This does not mean that analogy is not still the basic tool of historical explanation, but it does caution the historian against projecting a simple deterministic scheme onto the drama of human history. Indeed a careful scrutiny of the whole panorama of human events

dictates against a closed view of history which Hume's proposition presupposes. History has far too many surprises to say prior to investigation what is possible or impossible as a historical occurrence.

It is propositions two and three which get at the heart of the matter. What the historian considers probable or improbable will depend in large measure upon his preunderstanding. The danger is that the historian's preunderstanding will be closed-minded and exclude by definition the possibility of dealing with God's intervention in history. But such an exclusion, without a careful examination of the evidence, is to beg the question. The whole argument, resting on a rationalist preunderstanding, has haunted the historical critical method and has been assumed by many modern historians and theologians.

Rudolf Bultmann is a good example of one so influenced. He makes it clear that there is no room to treat supernatural events within the confines of the historical critical method. He argues that "the historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect." He goes on to assert that "this closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers and that therefore there is no 'miracle' is this sense of the word."[16]

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16 Existence and Faith, pp. 291, 292.

The key phrase is "includes the presupposition that...." But does it? Why does he insist on a view of history which by definition excludes the possibility of dealing with God's activity on the plane of history? The answer of course is his acceptance of a naturalistic world view of historiography. But do these positivist assumptions necessarily inhere in the historical method itself? We would argue that the historical method is neutral in regard to what can and cannot happen in history. Its job is to aid the historian in determining what did happen, not in determining what can happen.

IV. The Historian's Task

This brings us to the point where we must look more carefully at the relationship between the historical method and preunderstanding. We shall examine this relationship under three headings: Explanation, Epistemology and Objectivity.

A. Historical Explanation.

If we were to ask a modern historian what it is he seeks to uncover he would probably reply, "the significant events of the past," or perhaps, "the significant human events of the past."[17] If drawn out further in the conversation, he would no doubt add that the process of historical explanation involves more than just discovering what significant events have occurred, but also why they are significant and how they have occurred. He would explain

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[17] Collingwood, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

that the historian's responsibility is to make sense of the whole of history by explaining causes, patterns and processes. Continuing his explanation, he might say that history is a descriptive and analytical narrative of past events or facts written in a spirit of critical inquiry for the whole truth.

To further clarify historical explanation, let us compare it with scientific explanation and observe their similarities and differences as they both in their own ways seek the truth. One obvious way to distinguish their difference is to call attention to the factor of time. The historian seeks to uncover individual facts about the past whereas the scientist endeavors to discover individual facts about the present. But this is not their only difference and in order to see the others we might list at least four essential features of scientific knowledge:[18] (1) a body of systematically related material, arranged in an orderly way; (2) a series of general propositions drawn from the arranged material; (3) the capacity to predict and control; and (4) an objective account so that every unprejudiced observer ought to accept its validity if the evidence were put before him.

History does share some common concerns with science, namely the effort to be both systematic (1) and objective (4). But it does not try to state explicit propositions

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[18] See H. W. Walsh, _An Introduction to the Philosophy of History_, London, 1964, pp. 34 ff.

about the nature of human development, though it may use some form of generalization. Nor is it concerned to predict and control the future. The historian is conscious that history is altogether too complex and filled with the unique to force into an artificial mold. The freedom and subtleties of human nature inevitably embarrass a too simple scientific effort at precision. Reinhold Niebuhr states:

> Historical patterns are in a category of reality which cannot be identified with the structures of nature. They are to be sharply distinguished from natural structures because they represent a compound of freedom and necessity.

On the same page he says:

> It is because historical causation is endlessly complex, and historical dramas overlap one another in bewildering confusion, that history is not subject to the generalizations of either the scientists or the philosophers, who insist on trying to comprehend its multifarious themes in terms of either natural or ontological necessity.[19]

One might even wonder whether the scientist and the historian share a common concern for objectivity, if one means by objectivity a complete detachment from the object of study. While the historian does seek at one level to discover, examine and criticize by objective criteria documents of history and ascertain from them a body of so-called factual material, at another level he is personally

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[19] The Self and the Dramas of History, London, 1956, p. 57.

involved with his material creatively re-presenting it in an understandable fashion. It is at this point where the historian's preunderstanding has an important part to play in his interpretation. And it is this latter function of the historian which is ignored by the positivist conception of history which insists that all branches of knowledge depend on the same basic impersonal procedures of observation, conceptual reflection and verification.

At the other extreme of the positivist view of history is the idealist view which gives full consideration to the role of the historian in the historical process. The idealist historian postulates that the doings and experiences of human beings are the doings and experiences of human minds, and we are able to grasp them in their concrete detail because we have minds. By the act of re-thinking or re-living the historian is able to secure historical knowledge. His task is not so much to play the spectator as to imaginatively participate in the thoughts and decisions of the men who have made history. This of course involves some preunderstanding.

This point of view was noteably articulated by W. Dilthey who maintained that the distance between the historical object and the interpreting subject vanishes, for they are united by virtue of the soul which lives in them both.[20] Perhaps the most thorough going advocate of the

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20 Hodges, op. cit., p. 29.

idealist view of history was Benedetto Croce who defended the view that historical knowledge is at the same time self-knowledge and knowledge of mind. As he puts it: "the conception of history that we have reached...identifies history with the act of thought itself."[21] For our purpose what is important to observe is that both Dilthey and Croce drew the conclusion that the historian stands within history and participates in it. Both argued that we know <u>now</u> what happened <u>then</u> by what has been termed an act of mediation.

One of the best known exponents of the idealist point of view in historical explanation is R. G. Collingwood. According to Collingwood the historian does not apprehend historical phenomena in the same way that the scientist perceives natural facts. Rather he understands them by re-enacting the process of thought. Fundamentally, history is the "re-enactment of past thoughts in the historians's own mind."[22] Further, "historical knowledge is the knowledge of what mind has done in the past, and at the same time it is the re-doing of this, the perpetuation of past acts in the present..."[23] by an autonomous critical act of re-thinking.

It is not necessary to be a philosophical idealist to sympathize with these points they are making. The historian's task, while attempting to uncover truth with the same diligence as the scientist, proceeds on a different course, a

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21 *History: Its Theory and Practice*, tr. by Douglas Anslie, New York, 1921, p. 117.

22 Collingwood, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 218.

course which throws him into contact with his material in a much more personal way. History is a vicarious experience, one in which subject and object do not exist independently of each other, and this fact opens the way for the preunderstanding of the historian to play a significant role.

The historian's task then is to explain to the present the significant events of the past through the records which he possesses. This will rest on a combination of knowledge, creativity, common sense and intelligent guessing. He must try to reach meaningful decisions in regard to the evidence and make them rationally convincing not only to himself but to others. He must clear up obscurities, bring his material together in understandable categories, sift the fitting from the false and in general unravel and explain. His responsibility is "to study events not accessible to our observation, and to study these events inferentially, arguing to them from something else which is accessible to our observation, and which the historian calls 'evidence' for the event in which he is interested."[24] But the crucial point to note is that the final results of his explanation will depend to a large extent on the preunderstanding which he brings to his handling of the evidence. After the "scientific" work is done, judgments must still be made, and they will be made largely in terms of the historian's preunderstanding.

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24 *Ibid.*, p. 251.

B. Historical Epistemology

The historian not only must explain what it is that he tries to uncover, he must also give some account of the trustworthiness of the judgments he makes. His problems are increased because the facts he seeks to explain are no longer accessible to direct inspection. The historian cannot test the accuracy of historical statements by simply seeing whether they correspond to a reality which is independently known. The chief solution to his difficulty lies in turning to historical evidence, traces of the past which we possess. These "tracks", as Marc Blöch calls them,[25] come in an infinite variety, and neither their meaning nor their authenticity is always clear. Hence it is incumbent on the historian to be clear concerning his epistemological presuppositions and careful regarding the way he handles the evidence which he uses to support his case.

Let us look first at a possible theory of truth which the historian might utilize.[26] Traditionally, philosophers have worked with two theories of truth, the correspondence theory and the coherence theory. The correspondence theory says that a statement is true if it corresponds to the facts, and conversely, if it corresponds to the facts, it is a true statement. The fundamental problem for employing this theory of truth in history is that the facts are not available

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25 Op. cit., p. 55.
26 See Walsh, op. cit., pp. 72 ff.

for direct observation. It is difficult to grasp the given as given because we are separated in time from it.

The coherence theory of truth argues that truth is not so much a matter of the relation between a statement and fact as it is between one statement and another. A statement is true if it can be shown to cohere or fit in with all other statements we are prepared to accept. The difficulty with this theory is that all truth is essentially relative. It depends to a large extent on the preunderstanding that one already possesses which determines what statements are acceptable or unacceptable. Also it implies that all historical knowledge, in that it rests on knowledge of the present, becomes not knowledge of the past, but of the present. This last objection to the coherence theory of truth as applied to history does not carry nearly the force of the first. It is true that evidence for the past is present in the sense of being presented to the historian now, but it does not follow from this that it must refer to present time.

Where then is the historian to turn to justify the truth of his conclusions if he has no direct access to the past and if all historical statements are relative? A possible solution, as W. H. Walsh suggests,[27] might be a synthesis of the two theories. We would argue that there is an attempt in history, as in perception, to treat an objective and independent reality. There is a given element in historical thinking,

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[27] Ibid., p. 90.

even though the historian has no direct vision of it, nor can he isolate it for observation. His access is via the evidence which the past has left in the present. The way the historian handles this given element will depend on how it coheres with all other statements which he is prepared to accept. The validity of this theory of historical epistemology will depend in large measure on how the historian handles the evidence which supplies the given element to which he gives his attention. Because the evidence is subjected to the action of the historian's preunderstanding, he must establish certain checks and balances to prevent the negative influence of preunderstanding (e.g. prejudice) from taking its toll, and allow as far as possible for the evidence to speak for itself. This will necessitate the presence of a self-consciously formulated preunderstanding which, containing certain attitudes and assumptions, makes the goal realizable.

A list of the attitudes which the historian should possess in handling his material would have to include open-mindedness, curiosity, patience, accuracy, love of order, a logical mind, honesty, self-awareness and imagination.[28] If the historian does not possess these virtues, then his work is in vain and there is no possibility of spanning the gap between past and present in any meaningful way. There is no room in historical writing for a blurring of the horizon between

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[28] Barzun and Graff, op. cit., pp. 57 ff.

fact and fiction, and without these qualities the historian can make the evidence say almost anything he wishes.

The possession of these attitudes forces the historian to ask certain fundamental questions about his material:[29]

1. Is the object or piece of writing what it purports to be?

2. Is its message trustworthy?

3. How do I know the answer to the first two questions?

The answer to question 3 leads to another series of questions:

1. Who is the author or maker?

2. What does the object or piece of writing tell me?

3. What is the relation between the author and the message which is conveyed?

4. How does the message conveyed compare with other statements on the same point?

5. What do we know independently about the author and his credibility or the object and its authenticity?

6. What have other competent scholars who have examined the material said about it?

The answer to these questions should give us the following information:

1. Whether or not the evidence was forged, and if so, why, and whether it still has value.

2. What the evidence tells us and what can be inferred from it.

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[29] *Ibid.*, pp. 135 ff.

3. The degree of value, increasing proportionately in terms of the author's nearness in time and space to the event being considered, and the number of witnesses supporting the view; two, in this case being better than one.

4. The author's point of view.

In all of this probability is the great guide. Historical truth rests not on possibility nor on plausibility, but on probability. At this point it would perhaps be wise to clarify our usage of the term "probability". It has been used in at least two different ways which are generally referred to as the statistical and the inductive. According to the first, probability is a statistical concept of use only when there is a plurality of cases. For example, since a die has six faces, each of which is equally likely to turn up, the probability of throwing one particular number in any given throw is one in six. According to the other type of probability theory, to say that statement x is more probable than statement y is to say that when they are both considered in relation to a common body of prior propositions, it is more "reasonable" to believe x than y, or x is more worthy of belief than y. It is in this latter sense that we employ the term.[30]

The accent on probability again opens the door to preunderstanding. What the historian will consider probable or improbable in a given interpretation, after all the evidence

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[30] John Hick, Philosophy of Religion, pp. 29-30.

has been carefully examined, will depend to some extent on the assumptions he makes about the nature of ultimate reality and historical truth.

To summarize, there are four statements we can make regarding historical epistemology. (1) The past has left traces of itself in the present in an infinite variety of forms, and this constitutes the given with which the historian works. (2) The historian critically tests these traces to ascertain their message. (3) The historian's judgment regarding the evidence is governed by probability. (4) The reconstruction of an absolute past is a delusion because the historian has no direct access to the past, and because he brings to the evidence which he possesses his own preunderstanding.

C. Historical Objectivity

This last statement brings us to our third consideration of the historian's task, i.e. historical objectivity. By historical objectivity we mean that the condition must exist in a given historical analysis that all men thought competent to judge would reach approximately the same conclusions. All historians would agree that there is a need for some sort of objectivity and impartiality in their work, and the very method they employ, which we have just described in outline, is designed to answer this need. Yet there persists in history stubborn disagreements which imply that the sort of objectivity and agreement which one finds in science does not exist in history. Why is this the case? We have

already alluded to what we consider to be the answer, but we must be more explicit.

The answer lies in the fact that the historian brings to his material more and more varied types of preunderstanding than the scientist. The subjective element is always present no matter what precautions he may use to control it. All historical judgments are a complex mixture of interpretation and fact, and "there can be no interpretation of history without specific presuppositions."[31] Carl Becker, perhaps with tongue in cheek, describes historians as

> that ancient and honorable company of wise men of the tribe, of bards and story-tellers and minstrels, of soothsayers and priests, to whom in successive ages has been entrusted the keeping of the useful myths.[32]

Lest he be taken at face value, he quickly adds that "to establish the facts is always in order, and is indeed the first duty of the historian",[33] but his skepticism about historical objectivity nevertheless comes through. He goes on: "Being neither omniscient nor omnipresent, the historian is not the same always and everywhere; and for him.... the form and significance of remembered events, like the extension and velocity of physical objects, will vary with the time and place of the observer."[34] Even the most scrupulous historian cannot confine his material within the straitened bounds of scientific procedure because he cannot stand

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[31] Reinhold Niebuhr, <u>The Nature and Destiny of Man</u>, Vol. II, p. 6.

[32] <u>Op. cit.</u>, p. 247.

[33] <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 249.

[34] <u>Ibid.</u>, pp. 251-252.

outside the course of time and judge the panorama of events. He is involved in their continual flow and movement and, whether he likes it or not he cannot claim to have a fixed and final knowledge. His preunderstanding will always influence his views. He belongs to a particular family, class, country and culture. He speaks a given language and was educated in a certain way. He has come under the influence of some people and not others. All of this conditioning affects, though not in any absolutely deterministic pattern, the type of preunderstanding which he will possess. It will contribute to the prior information he has about the matter to be interpreted; it will suggest the ideological structure from which he works; it will help shape the attitudes he brings; and it will supply the method of approach. His preunderstanding will in turn influence his interpretation. It may be, for example, that a particular attitude or ideological construct will be the determining factor in his selection of what is important and worth chronicling and his manner of colligating it. "Like any scholar, like any mind which perceives at all, the historian selects and sorts"[35] and this process is inevitably linked to personal convictions. For "facts cannot be selected without some personal conviction as to what is truth, and cannot be arranged without the same conviction--and this conviction is a bias."[36] The historian cannot escape his own historical existence. This

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[35] Bloch, op. cit., p. 144.

[36] Allen Nevins, Ibid., pp. 54-55.

should not be construed as an argument for total historical skepticism. It is only

> the discovery of a second dimension of historical thought, the history of history: the discovery that the historian himself together with the here-and-now which forms the total body of evidence available to him, is part of the process he is studying, has his own place in that process, and can see it only from the point of view which at this present moment he occupies within it.[37]

So, if it is true that every historical interpretation is guided by some prior understanding, then in what sense, if at all, can history be called objective? Or to word the question another way: Is it possible to gain objective historical knowledge at all? Of course it is possible to fix some events objectively by the documents which we possess, but in general these do not constitute significant history. The meaning and importance of the event must also be ascertained if the historian is to fulfill his responsibilities. Perhaps a partial solution to the demand for objectivity might lie in the following considerations: (1) An effort must be made to arrive at an objective judgment by remaining open to any conclusions to which the historical evidences may lead. The historian must have a preunderstanding which allows for this openness. (2) The historian moves closer to objectivity insofar as he critically tests in all ways possible, including an examination of the scholarly opinions of his colleagues, his own subjective impressions, so as to

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[37] Collingwood, op. cit., p. 248.

gain a knowledge of objects. (3) An objective judgment is only realized, but nevertheless realized, from the perspective of the historian. Because each man is a complex being, and historically conditioned in a different way, each man will view historical phenomena from a different point of view. Each of these viewpoints is open to one side of the historical process and from each viewpoint something objectively true will appear.[38] The picture only becomes falsified if one viewpoint is made absolute. (4) There are some historical phenomena which require that a particular preunderstanding be present in order for them to be grasped in their full significance. The Christian affirms that God's revelation in Jesus Christ is such a phenomenon, and that faith is the necessary preunderstanding. We will consider this claim in more detail in our next chapter.

V. Conclusions

What conclusions can we draw from this brief discussion of the role of preunderstanding in historical interpretation? The first one is that historiography in its explanation and method is not inherently hostile to Christian faith, nor does it exclude a priori the possibility of dealing with God's activity in history. Historical method itself is neutral regarding the nature of ultimate truth, and Christian theology should not allow the presuppositions of positivist historiog-

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[38] Bultmann, History and Eschatology, p. 118.

raphy to dictate what can be treated historically.[39]

Second, preunderstanding is present in all historical writing even though there may be an appearance of definiteness and finality. The historian must be conscious of the relative nature of all views, and particularly of his own. He should not fear to expose his own viewpoint to the light of others, and in so doing be ready to revise his decisions. He should resist, on one hand, black and white thinking and, on the other, skepticism, for in both cases he strays from the responsibilities of his task.[40] He must have the courage to make relative decisions on the basis of the evidence.

Third, the historian should apply the historical method with consistency and care in order to filter out the negative aspects of his own subjectivity. He should learn to be self-aware enough to recognize his own preunderstanding, even acknowledge it, and rigorously judge it. For as one author has expressed it, "it is important...that whatever the presuppositions of the historian may be, it should not be one which biases or embarrasses him in the course of his work."[41]

Finally, it should be remembered that preunderstanding has a positive role to play, for without it, we could not even begin to interpret the given element in history. Our preunderstanding makes possible insights and modes of understanding which would otherwise be out of the question. That faith is such a preunderstanding in relation to the Christian revelation is a claim that we must now examine.

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39 See T. A. Roberts, History and Christian Apologetics, London, 1960.

40 Hendrikus Berkhof, op. cit., pp. 202 ff.

41 J. V. Langmead Casserly, Toward a Theology of History, London, 1965, p. 89.

Chapter Five
History and Faith

I. Introduction

We are now in a position to turn our attention from a general discussion of the role of preunderstanding in historical study to the specific role of preunderstanding in the interpretation of the Christian faith. As we do, it should be borne in mind how the development of our theme has proceeded up to this point. We have seen that preunderstanding is an everpresent feature of all perception and interpretation of reality and hence will be a factor in the endeavor to give a true interpretation of the Christian revelation. Particular attention was paid to the influence of preunderstanding in historical interpretation because of the contention that the arena in which God has disclosed Himself is history, and uniquely so in the man Jesus of Nazareth. In the analysis of the relationship between preunderstanding and history, it was concluded that probability was the distinctive feature of historical interpretation. To assure the maximum degree of truth-probability for any historical interpretation, we saw that it became necessary to recognize both the positive and negative influence of preunderstanding, and to utilize a methodology which would accentuate the positive and put strict controls on the negative. This of course holds with special force in the all important task of interpreting

the history which surrounds the appearance of Jesus Christ.

We will discuss the relationship of preunderstanding to the interpretation of the Christian revelation by considering the questions raised by the historical critical method as it is applied to the Christian faith, giving special attention to the problem of the historical Jesus. From there we will discuss the resurrection as a historical event, arguing that the only appropriate preunderstanding for full comprehension of the resurrection is faith.

II. Faith and the Historical Critical Method

The only really important traces which we have of Jesus are the documents of the New Testament. With the rise of historical thinking in the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that these documents were analyzed historically. Many within the church viewed this critical approach to the Bible with less than favorable eyes, fearing that the results of such an analysis would be detrimental to faith. It is to the credit of Protestant Liberalism that its representatives welcomed the historical study of the Bible. It is perhaps to the shame of some more conservative theologians that they were afraid to take the risk of subjecting their understanding of the Bible to historical criticism, though in all fairness it should be acknowledged that they did have some grounds for anxiety, as the historical method was often bound to a closed naturalistic and positivistic world view.

But after nearly two centuries of historical study of Scripture, it has now become clear to the present generation

of biblical scholarship, whether liberal or conservative, that the Bible cannot be understood any other way. There can be no turning the clock back to the precritical age of biblical interpretation. As one conservative scholar has said: "These critical methods must be used because of the obvious fact that the Bible is not a magical book, but a product of history written in the words of men."[1] The historical approach to the Bible has opened our eyes to its meaning and significance in a way which was closed to ages prior to the revolution in historical thinking.

Yet when the results of the application of the historical method to the Bible turned out to be different from the traditional beliefs held by the church for centuries, there was cause for theological concern. Three options presented themselves to the theologians.[2] (1) The historical critical approach could be rejected outright as a valid method for interpreting the Bible. This has been the course followed by Fundamentalism. (2) There could be a declaration of peaceful co-existence, in which both history and faith were given their respective domains. This course has been followed by many theologians of the modern era, and perhaps most notably by Rudolf Bultmann. (3) There could be an attempt at integrating both the historical and theological disciplines.

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[1] George E. Ladd, The New Testament and Criticism, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1967, p. 22.

[2] Braaten, History and Hermeneutics, p. 36.

It is this latter approach which we maintain has the best possibility of doing justice to the Christian revelation.

Option one, the rejection of the historical critical approach to the interpretation of the Bible, seems an unlikely route for theology to pursue. Even if one maintains that the Bible is the infallibly written Word of God, it must be admitted that this Word of God is given to men through historical events and historical personages. This very fact demands historical criticism. What advocates of the conservative point of view often fail to realize is the theological neutrality of the historical method. It need not rule out by definition the possibility of God's intervention in history. Historical criticism of the Bible simply means making intelligent judgments about the evidence, not deciding *a priori* what can happen in history.

The second option, the separation between history and faith, is epitomized by Rudolf Bultmann's call to demythologize the New Testament by way of an existential interpretation. Bultmann's concern is to avoid the inevitable collision between historical fact and existential faith by placing faith out of reach of historical scrutiny and by attempting a redefinition of history. He maintains that the New Testament, as we possess it, is not historically accurate, but contains mythological elements. It was written at a time far enough removed from the history it records so that it

has lost touch with the actual situation, and its authors have imposed their prescientific world view on its pages. A reconstruction is necessary on the basis of the critical principles of historical study. But faith does not need to wait for the answers uncovered by historical reconstruction. What is important in the New Testament message is man's self-understanding. By demythologizing the New Testament, this essential message becomes clear. The real issue for faith is not what happened <u>then</u> but what happens <u>now</u> in the moment of existential decision. It is the Christ of faith, not the Jesus of history, with whom we are concerned. The meaning of the kerygma is not to be sought in uncovering the historical Jesus, which is impossible anyway, but in the awareness of responsibility before God. Brute facts, uncovered by disinterested and objective history, are unimportant for faith. Bultmann does not deny that they exist, only that they are not essential for faith. There is a different level of historical knowledge which is important for faith, and that is existential knowledge through encounter with history. The meaning of history is to be sought in the present because "every historical moment has its own meaning in itself in that it implies openness to God and that it has the possibility of becoming the eschatological moment."[3] As Bultmann himself expresses it: "The meaning of history lies always in the

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3 Heinrich Ott, "Rudolf Bultmann's Philosophy of History", in Kegley, ed., <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 59.

present, and when the present is conceived as the eschatological present by Christian faith the meaning of history is realized."[4]

Such a redefinition of history may have eased one tension, but it also created others. In the theology of the last decade there has been a gradual consensus that the chasm between faith and history must somehow be spanned. Few theologians would deny their indebtedness to Bultmann's thought, but few also are completely at ease with his nearly total divorce of the kerygma from history. Gerhard Ebeling, though he stands squarely in the Bultmannian tradition, states: "Christianity stands or falls with the tie that binds it to its unique historical origin."[5]

The theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg is an expression of this dissatisfaction over the split between faith and history, and most dramatically represents option three, the effort to unite the historical and theological disciplines. Pannenberg wants to emancipate historical method from its "Babylonian Captivity" to positivism and naturalism. He argues that to retreat to the security of traditional dogma (Karl Barth) or existential decision (Rudolf Bultmann) is to dodge the issue. If revelation is historical occurrence, then the historical method should be an appropriate way of uncovering it. Historical methodology must be freed from its anthropocentric presuppositions. The principles of research do not necessarily imply that man rather than God is the moving force

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4 History and Eschatology, p. 155.
5 Op. cit., p. 28.

behind history. Though he is careful to acknowledge that historical science is a human effort, and one which makes use of analogy, he nevertheless argues that this does not necessarily preclude the possibility of the novel and unrepeatable. The historian should not deny the possibility of an event simply because he has no immediate analogy to it in his every day experience of reality. Faith and history are brought together in Pannenberg's view by his concept of revelation as history.[7] God stands behind all history giving it meaning, not just one particular segment. For "only from the vantage point of universal history is it possible to find the complete meaning of any single event."[8] Without this postulate, history is a meaningless maze of occurrences. He says: "The unity of history can...only be understood in a way in which its connection and contingency have a common root."[9] The totality of reality as history is God's world which He created and through which He reveals Himself. The living God of the Bible is Lord over all nations, not just Israel. Because God's revelation to mankind comes as history, the historical method is the only reliable way of dealing with the past, and faith must be content to be dependent on the results of historical research. In fact historical reason and faith are not inseparable acts following a chronological

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[7] See Pannenberg, ed., Offenbarung als Geschichte.

[8] Pannenberg, "Heilsgeschehen und Geschichte", Kerygma und Dogma, 5 (1959), 280.

[9] Ibid., p. 284.

or psychological sequence, but co-essential dimensions of the total act of the person. Pannenberg's concern is to reverse the subjectivist emphasis in theology which has existed since Schleiermacher and which derives revelation from the experience of faith rather than from reason's knowledge of history. When reason's role is removed from the act of faith, nothing prevents faith from postulating whatever is emotionally satisfying. He even refuses to separate historical knowledge from saving faith. For Pannenberg there can be no split between the two.

Pannenberg's radical departure from the Neo-Kantian distinction between reality and value and his new emphasis on the historicity of the saving events are to be welcomed, as is his straightforward effort to free historiography from the confines of its naturalistic presuppositions and his bold attempt to reunite reason and faith. His work has opened up whole new vistas for theological reflection. Yet there are points where his theology seems vulnerable to criticism.[10] In the first place, he fails to do justice to the doctrine of the Word of God. The place of the kerygma as the mediator of the historical revelation tends to be diminished. He defines God's revelation as merely a matter of historical facts; it _is_ _there_ for anyone who has eyes to see. Secondly, because of this position, he almost substitutes sight for faith. Faith for Pannenberg becomes not so much a gift of the

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[10] For a full discussion see James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., eds., _New Frontiers in Theology_, _Vol. III_, _Theology as History_, New York, 1967.

Spirit of God as it is a product of reason. There seems little room left for trust. Finally, he seems to lose the category of uniqueness in the redemptive events. Although one appreciates his effort to keep faith which is not based on fact from entering the picture, it does not follow that there can be no unique and special revelation. Just because God is seen as the prime mover in all historical events does not necessarily imply that He has not revealed Himself in a special way at particular times and places. But these points of vulnerability do not diminish the gains made in emancipating Christian theology from the bondage of positivist assumptions in historiography.

The problem of the relationship between faith and history has again raised the issue of the historical Jesus. And it is at this point where we can best observe the role of preunderstanding in the interpretation of the Christian faith. The historical critical method, built on positivist assumptions, originally met its greatest obstacle in its attempt to isolate the historical Jesus. The field of biblical scholarship is cluttered with failures to explain who Jesus of Nazareth was and what his meaning is for us. Our purpose is not to give a complete account of this history, but to mention some general trends which will help us put the problem in perspective.[11]

With the rise of historical thinking in the nineteenth

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[11] For an interesting treatment, see Hugh Anderson, ed., Jesus, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1967.

century, the traditional christological formulations were seriously challenged. The unqualified acceptance of the Chalcedonian model was undermined when it was demonstrated that there was dependence on Greek philosophical categories. It was thought that Jesus as he "really" was had been buried in a theological system of abstract concepts. The Jesus of the Gospels and the Christ of the creeds appeared to be quite different. Even among the laity, there was a genuine suspicion that Jesus had been misunderstood.

This shift from a dogmatic to a historical perspective culminated in an intensive effort to reconstruct an authentic replica of Jesus. The scholars of this era made a sincere effort to rid themselves of their theological presuppositions in order to uncover the core of historical reality about Jesus. Yet preunderstanding, as we have argued, is not so easily shed, and between the lines of the assorted biographies of Jesus one is able to discern the cultural and religious viewpoints of their authors. What was discovered historically more often than not had a too convenient correspondence to what was needed theologically.

In general, the "quest for the historical Jesus" was divided between naturalistic and supernaturalistic approaches, with the majority being "positive" in that they attempted to establish the faith on solid historical foundations. Among the "negative" and more radical attempts to reconstruct a picture of Jesus was that of David Strauss. He argued that the historical life of Jesus is hidden beneath a thick layer

of religious mythology. Being a radical Hegelian, he was not particularly bothered about this reduction of historical content in the Gospels, but was concerned with the notion that the essence of Christianity is to be found in the idea of God-manhood which entered historical consciousness for the first time in Jesus. The idea, once launched, Strauss argued, no longer needs the undergirding of genuine evidence of historical event.

Ultimately it was the rigorous application of the historical method itself which signaled the defeat of the attempt to reconstruct a true portrait of the historical Jesus. Albert Schweitzer's study of the "life of Jesus" movement and his conclusive argument that the eschatological preaching of Jesus conflicts with modern notions of religion and morality marked the end of the era. Schweitzer writes: "Thus each successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts in Jesus: that was, indeed, the only way in which it could make him live."[12] At the beginning of the twentieth century the frustrating presence of irreconcilable viewpoints produced a general historical skepticism and the way was open for a new theological approach.

In the later part of the nineteenth century the theologian Martin Kähler had maintained that the only Jesus whom we know is the one whom they preached as the risen Christ who is Lord. In his book, _Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus_, he argued that the

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12 _Op. cit._, p. 4.

real Christ is not "the historical Jesus" but the "kerygmatic Christ". Kähler did not repudiate the earthly Jesus, but the Jesus who had been manufactured by the historiography of the nineteenth century. What was needed, he asserted, was the Christ of the Bible who lived, died and rose again from the dead.

It was into this general framework which the dialectical theologians of the 1920's and 1930's moved. Reacting against the mood of historical skepticism, they attempted to free Christology from its dependence on the historical and psychological pictures of the personality of Jesus. Influenced by Søren Kierkegaard, who had argued that historical inquiry into the life of Jesus can never produce anything certain or relevant for faith, men such as Barth, Brunner, Gogarten, Tillich and Bultmann all disclaimed the historical Jesus movement.

The problem which this disclaimer on the quest for the historical Jesus raised for theology was whether such a break between faith and historical research could be tolerated. The problem, as we have observed, is most evident in the theology of Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann accepted Kähler's idea that the Gospels are a kerygmatic witness to Christ and not biographical reports. True faith, therefore, rests on the kerygma, not on the shaky foundation of historical research. Yet Bultmann is not quite willing to go all the way with this assertion. He does maintain that at least the bare fact

of Jesus' historicity and his death on the cross are necessary to the kerygma.[13] But if the kerygma is dependent at all on Jesus, then faith cannot be independent of historical inquiry. This inconsistency in Bultmann's theology has its root in his uncritical acceptance of the positivist historiography of the nineteenth century. His acceptance of the presuppositions of this view of history forces Bultmann to remove faith from historical inquiry and root it in existential categories. Yet he retains the factuality of Jesus' life and death somewhat inconsistently in order to maintain some connection between Jesus and the kerygma.

In more recent theology there has been a gradual disenchantment with the conclusion that the historical Jesus bears little or no relationship to faith. Joachim Jeremias writes:

> To anyone who is not aware of the controversy, the question whether the historical Jesus and his messages have any significance for the Christian faith must sound absurd. No one in the ancient church, no one in the church of the Reformation period and the two succeeding centuries thought of asking such a question.[14]

There is a new openness to the possibility, even necessity, of uniting faith and history in some meaningful fashion. One New Testament scholar summarizes the situation as follows: "Today, however, we can be grateful that neither the rarefied

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[13] See e.g. Bultmann's article in Kegley, ed., op. cit., p. 274.

[14] The Problem of the Historical Jesus, tr. by Norman Perrin, Philadelphia, 1964, p. 1.

atmosphere of the 'theology of the Word' and of 'existential theology', nor the impasse reached by criticism, have stifled the breath of continuing empirical concern to investigate and shed light on the concrete historical character of the revelation in the man Jesus of Nazareth."[15] There is the growing conviction that "to hold an historical faith is to have a faith which stands or falls with the records."[16] Stephen Neill remarks: "It seems to be the case that the faith of the Church stands or falls with the general reliability of the historical evidence for the life and death of Jesus Christ."[17] The Dutch theologian, Hendrikus Berkhof, concludes that "what we believe and confess concerning Christ as the meaning of history is related to the reality with which our history books are concerned."[18]

This new concern to explore the relationship between the historical Jesus and the kerygma has been labeled "the new quest of the historical Jesus".[19] The common concern of the "new questers" is to establish the correspondence between history and proclamation. In calling for a new quest, there is no devaluation of the enormity of the problems. There is a general recognition that the same difficulties and

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[15] Hugh Anderson, Jesus and Christian Origins, New York, 1964, p. 96.

[16] McIntyre, The Shape of Christology, p. 40.

[17] The Interpretation of the New Testament, London, 1964, p. 221.

[18] Op. cit., pp. 197 f.

[19] See James M. Robinson, A New Quest of the Historical Jesus, Naperville, Ill., 1959.

limitations in Jesus research obtain now as obtained in the earlier efforts. The historian is still subject to the negative influences of his presuppositions, and there is no documentary evidence from Jesus' contemporaries of such an objective character as to build up a neutral portrait of Jesus. There is also the general acknowledgement, to which Pannenberg is an exception, that historical research cannot go from facts, even interpreted facts, to tell us about the revelatory and redemptive action of God.[20]

Günther Bornkamm is representative of the new quest. In his study of Jesus he writes: "No one is any longer in a position to write a life of Jesus" because "we possess no single word of Jesus and no single story of Jesus, no matter how incontestably genuine they may be, which do not embody at the same time the confession of the believing congregation, or at least are embedded therein. This makes the search after the bare facts of history difficult and to a large extent futile."[21] Yet a few pages later he justifies his own effort when he says: "Although the gospels do not speak of the history of Jesus in the sense of reproducing the course of his career in all its happenings and stages, in its inner and outer development, nevertheless they do speak of history as occurrence and event."[22]

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[20] Anderson, Jesus and Christian Origins, pp. 97 ff.
[21] Op. cit., pp. 13-14.
[22] Ibid., pp. 24-25.

Ernst Fuchs[23] and Gerhard Ebeling[24] have turned their inquiry into a specific theological program. Working closely together they have developed a hermeneutical theory which rests upon the relationship of language and faith. The historical Jesus and the kerygmatic Christ are linked together in the concept of word-event. These men are not specifically interested in a biographical account of Jesus, but what uniquely came to expression in him, namely faith. To believe in Jesus means to re-enact the decision of faith which Jesus originally made. Jesus is more the witness to faith than he is the object of faith. But his historicity is nevertheless important for, as Ebeling puts it, "faith is manifestly not Christian faith if it does not have a basis in the historical Jesus himself."[25] He further argues 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."[26]

Other theologians, less influenced by Bultmann, have welcomed the new quest as a justification of their original positions that interest in the historical Jesus was a legitimate theological concern. Theologians like Joachim Jeremias, Otto Michel, Oscar Cullmann and Ethelbert Stauffer have really never bowed to Bultmannian prohibitions on searching beyond

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23 See his Studies in the Historical Jesus, tr. by Andrew Scobie, London, 1964.

24 Op. cit., pp. 200 ff.

25 Ibid., p. 204.

26 Ibid., p. 205.

the kerygma for historical fact in order to more firmly root faith.

It is beyond the scope of our study to discuss the new quest in its many forms. Our purpose is rather to establish the general consensus, even among the Bultmann theologians, that there is a continuity between Jesus and the kerygma. There must be at least a minimum core of factuality[27] regarding Jesus if the kerygma is to present us with a way of life that is realistic and not culled from a dream world. This factual element can and should be treated by the historical critical method for, as Alan Richardson reminds us, "The affirmations of the Christian creeds are historical, not metaphysical, in character, and Christian theology itself is a matter of the interpretation of history."[28]

III. Faith and the Resurrection of Christ

For two reasons the particular affirmation of the Christian creeds around which the Jesus of history/Christ of faith debate should center is the resurrection. In the first place, if there is one issue on which the form-critics are agreed in their study of the earliest Christian traditions, it is that faith in the risen Christ forms an indispensable part of the kerygma. A second reason is that one of the most important developments in recent biblical studies is the

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27 John Macquarrie, Studies in Christian Existentialism, p. 148.

28 History Sacred and Profane, p. 13.

discovery that the resurrection has a high degree of resistibility to all hypotheses which fail to reckon with its historicity.[29]

The ironic element in the form-critical consensus that the resurrection forms an essential part of the kerygma is that many scholars, despite their differences, are agreed in their view that the resurrection is not a historical event. They may look for the continuity in Jesus' faith, in his preaching, his idea of grace, his attitudes and actions, or his self-understanding, but not in his resurrection.

Why is there such a wide acceptance of Bultmann's remark that "an historical event which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable"?[30] Why do positions both to the right and left of Bultmann share the view that the event of the resurrection forms no part of the historical problem of the life of Jesus? The answer lies in the acceptance of a naturalistic view of history, a position which involves these theologians in affirming the centrality of the resurrection in the faith of the primitive church while denying the resurrection as an event of past history. So in the attempt to maintain the continuity with the kerygma of the early church, they are forced to maintain its meaning while denying its historical reality, a point of view which seems less than convincing. As for example in the case of Bultmann, this

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[29] Braaten, _History and Hermeneutics_, p. 77.

[30] _Kerygma and Myth_, p. 39.

position is sustained in his familiar existential interpretation. Because the resurrection accounts are not statements about what really happened, but expressions of faith in the New Testament community, they may be retained in the symbolic language of faith as the expression of self-understanding. But can a historical approach to the resurrection be ignored in the consideration of the life of Jesus question? Is it possible to really understand Jesus apart from the resurrection?

In the 1950's there began to appear a series of studies[31] which urged that theology move toward the acceptance of the historicity of the Lord's resurrection. In 1952 Hans F. von Campenhausen analyzed the traditions of the Easter events and the empty tomb in Der Ablauf der Ostereignisse und das leere Grab in an effort to show that the resurrection accounts have an early place in the development of the tradition, and hence are acceptable as authentic historical reports. Following von Campenhausen, a series of full scale studies of the resurrection appeared: Karl Heinrich Rangstorf's Die Auferstehung Jesus (1952), Richard R. Niebuhr's Resurrection and Historical Reason (1957), and Gerhard Koch's Die Auferstehung Jesu Christi (1959). Recently in Wolfhart Pannenberg's Grundzüge des Christologie (1964) and Jürgen Moltmann's Theologie der Hoffnung (1964) there is a scholarly effort

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[31] See the list in Braaten, History and Hermeneutics, p. 92.

to place the historical resurrection of Jesus at the center of the theology of the church. All of these scholars describe the resurrection as a historical event while not denying its existential meaning. For them there is an indispensable unity of event and meaning.

For both Pannenberg and Moltmann the issue hinges on the preunderstanding which one brings to the historical task. It all depends on what one means by the concept of history. For Pannenberg, "it is the close examination of the reports of the resurrection that determine its historicity, and not the prior judgment that all events in history must be more or less the same."[32] Moltmann has concentrated on showing how the modern preunderstanding of what is historically possible stands in direct conflict with the biblical view of what is historically possible.[33] The Bible understands historical possibility in terms of the activity of God, and it is an openness to the possibility of God's intervention for which we have been arguing. For, as one scholar concludes, "nothing is to be gained by coming to the New Testament already strongly prejudiced against any possibility that God could have raised Jesus from the dead, as an event in our world and in our time."[34] It is not necessary to maintain with Bornkamm that "the event of Christ's resurrection...is...removed from

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32 Pannenberg, "Heilsgeschehen und Geschichte", p. 266.

33 Jürgen Moltmann, Theologie der Hoffnung, Munich, 1965, p. 157.

34 Anderson, Jesus and Christian Origins, p. 189.

historical scholarship."[35] In order to do justice to the resurrection there must be a rejection of all ready made answers. Whether an event happened or not cannot be settled beforehand. Whether Christ rose from the dead is an exceedingly difficult problem. One must ask all sorts of theological questions including the meaning of the resurrection and whether there is a resurrection apart from faith. But the resurrection also raises the historical question and this question must be answered by interpreting the evidence.

While it is not our purpose to go into the nature of the evidence for Christ's resurrection, we must still comment on the issues involved in judging it. There are two basic criteria for evaluating and interpreting historical evidence: (1) the rigorous application of the historical method itself, which insures as far as possible the objectivity of the facts; and (2) the preunderstanding of the historian. Applying these two criteria to the resurrection involves then an examination of the attestations on the part of the witnesses to see if what they record as happening could be more rationally accounted for by some alternative hypothesis, and the maintenance of a preunderstanding which, checked by the historical critical method, remains open and sympathetic to accepting the message of the evidence.[36]

The evidences available to us concerning Christ's

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35 Op. cit., p. 180.
36 Richardson, History Sacred and Profane, p. 195.

resurrection are the Easter traditions handed down by the early church. These resurrection narratives, arising from the community which came into being for the express purpose of being a witness to the resurrection, constitute the primary evidence for it. What is needed is a careful analysis of the two strands of the tradition, one dealing with the appearances of the risen Lord, and the other with the phenomenon of the empty tomb.[37] After such an analysis it is safe to conclude that today there is a great deal more openness to the historical reliability of the resurrection testimonies. Even the tradition of the empty tomb is not easily dismissed as having no authentic historical content.

While the results of biblical scholarship may not lead us to faith in the risen Lord, they at least clear the way for it by removing false hindrances. As we have argued, the historian's ability to believe the resurrection will ultimately depend on the preunderstanding which he brings to the evidence. We agree with Alan Richardson who maintains that "the historian's final judgment of the evidence will, then, in the last resort, and after as vigorous a critical appraisal as he can make, be determined by the man he is."[38] The gulf of time between the historian and his object must be bridged from both ends. The evidence must be carefully analyzed,

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[37] Anderson, _Jesus and Christian Origins_, pp. 185 ff.
[38] _History Sacred and Profane_, p. 203.

and the historian's mind must be open to receive the truth of the event in question.

What conclusions then can we draw concerning the resurrection of Christ as a historical event? In the first place, there is a good deal of evidence to support the fact that the resurrection occurred as an event in history. While this question is far from settled, and probably never will be, the recent trends in biblical scholarship give encouraging support to the resurrection's historicity. It is a historical probability. Secondly, in order to fairly treat this conclusion, the historian must rid himself of preconceived ideas which compel him to believe that it could not have happened. Finally, and positively, for the resurrection to be believed, the historian will have to have a preunderstanding which is open to accepting the implications of the evidence. He will have to know in his own life something of the experience of the church as it worships Jesus as the living Lord. In short, he will have to have faith as a rational motive for affirming that Jesus is the risen Lord.

Faith, then, is the necessary preunderstanding for the interpretation of the resurrection. In that we have maintained that the resurrection is historical, we have also committed ourselves to the historical method as a second necessary ingredient for an adequate preunderstanding. And if the resurrection is foundational, which we believe it is, then it would follow that faith linked to the historical method is also the appropriate preunderstanding for the more general interpretation of the Christian faith. The faith of which

we speak is firmly rooted in historical probability, though it is not born of historical knowledge, but of God. Historical evidence may suggest that God is present and acting in the event of the resurrection, but it cannot supply the personal experience of trust in and commitment to the risen Lord. Yet it will prevent faith from postulating anything which it wishes. Thus faith and historical study are not basically opposed to each other, but necessarily intersect in Jesus Christ, and constitute the minimum requirements for a hermeneutical approach to the Christian revelation.

We now turn our attention to an examination of the role played by preunderstanding in representative historical and biblical interpretations of the Christian faith as they have appeared in and during the life of the church.

SECTION II

PREUNDERSTANDING IN HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Chapter Six

The Theology of History: Augustine

I. The Formation of Augustine's Preunderstanding

In Section I we attempted to analyze the nature of preunderstanding and to assess its place in the historical and biblical interpretation of the Christian faith. We argued specifically that faith is the necessary preunderstanding for an adequate interpretation of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. We further maintained that since the Bible understands revelation as occurring in history, any interpretive approach must necessarily be rooted in the historical method. We concluded that faith and historical study constitute the minimum requirements of an adequate hermeneutic for the Christian faith.

In this present section we will attempt to describe and evaluate, in light of the criteria established in Section I, the role which preunderstanding has played in selected and representative historical interpretations of the Christian faith as they have appeared throughout the life of the church. Generally our analysis will consist of four parts: (1) An isolation of those factors which contribute to the interpreter's preunderstanding, and particularly that aspect

of his preunderstanding which is directly related to his view of history; (2) A description of this preunderstanding in terms of its type and function; (3) A tracing of the influence of his preunderstanding on his historical interpretation of the Christian faith; and (4) An evaluation of the interpreter's view in light of the two categories of faith and history.

By "historical interpretations" we have in mind those positions which attempt to ascertain the place of Christianity in history. This will involve us in at least three considerations: (1) the interpreter's understanding of history; (2) the place he gives to Christianity in history; and (3) the way the interpreter actually does history. It is important to keep in mind as we go along in this section that our concern is with the way the interpreter's preunderstanding influences his historical interpretation of the Christian faith, not his total view of reality or even his broader understanding of Christianity. We will therefore center our attention on the presuppositions of historical understanding.

The obvious and logical place to start in assessing the influence of preunderstanding on historical interpretations of the Christian faith is with Augustine whose City of God, a "monumental theology of history"[1], was to exercise such a profound influence on subsequent generations of interpreters of history. In order to gain an appreciation of the preunderstanding from within which Augustine attempts a historical

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[1] Thomas Merton, "Introduction," in St. Augustine, The City of God, tr. by Marcus Dods, New York, 1950, p. 14.

interpretation of the Christian faith, it is necessary to look briefly at his life and times out of which his preunderstanding was shaped.

The world into which Augustine was born in Tagaste in the province of Numidia in North Africa in 354 A.D. was exceedingly complex. It was, as one author stated it in 1940, "a world the perplexities of which have probably never been exceeded by any period, before or since."[2] Behind Augustine was more than a millenium of sustained effort to realize a stable society based on the classical idea of the commonwealth. But for over a century prior to his birth, the Roman Empire had begun to decline. No political or military effort seemed capable of restoring its original strength. Military disasters and internal decay pointed to the fact that Rome was collapsing. In this atmosphere the intellectually curious Augustine was bound to reflect on the nature of history.[3]

The more immediate influences on the development of Augustine's preunderstanding were his parents and his education. His father, Patricius, was a pagan and his mother, Monica, as is well-known, was a devout Christian. It was Monica who was the dominant force in the household, and Augustine was brought up as a Christian.[4] Both parents were determined to provide a proper education for their

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[2] Charles N. Cochrane, Christianity and Classical Culture, London, 1940, p. 380.

[3] Ibid., pp. 381 ff.

[4] See Augustine's remark in his Confessions, Cambridge, 1908, I, x, 17.

son. Augustine learned Latin and arithmetic from a schoolmaster in Tagaste and then, in 365, he went to Madaura where the foundations of his knowledge of Latin literature and grammar were laid. The actual content of his education in Madaura was meager, concentrating almost exclusively on the literary and ignoring philosophy, science and history. In 371 Augustine moved on to Carthage to complete his education. The combined influence of the city and his pagan teachers caused him to break morally and intellectually from his Christian faith.[5]

At the age of 19, in 373, a significant change took place in Augustine's life. He describes the precipitating incident as follows:

> In the usual course of the syllabus, I had reached a book by Cicero: Its style was admired by almost all, though its message was ignored. The book, however, contains an exhortation to philosophy: it is called "The Hortensius". This book, indeed, changed all my way of feeling. It changed my prayers to Thee, O Lord; it gave me entirely different plans and aspirations. Suddenly, all empty hope for my career lost its appeal; and I was left with an unbelievable fire in my heart, desiring the deathless qualities of wisdom, and I made a start to rise up and return to Thee....I was on fire, my God, on fire to fly away from earthly things to Thee.[6]

It was wisdom which Augustine sought after as Cicero

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5 Ibid., III, i, 1.
6 Ibid., III, iv, 7.

had urged. He turned first to the Bible but was not impressed with it because it did not measure up to his refined expectations and tastes.[7] His attention then moved toward an active group of Manicheans in Carthage whose views appeared to Augustine to be more acceptable and to provide a more profitable direction in which to pursue wisdom. The Manicheans, as Augustine saw them and as they saw themselves, taught a rational presentation of truth in distinction from the "barbaric and illogical ideas of Christianity". Of particular attraction to Augustine was their solution to the problem of evil. The Manichean saw the answer to this puzzling question in a dualism of two ultimate principles: a good principle, light, God or Ormuzd; and an evil principle, darkness, Ahriman. These two principles are eternal and their strife is eternal. Man reflects these principles and their eternal conflict in his dual nature, his soul being good and his body evil.[8] Attracted by this solution and other features of the system, Augustine became a "Hearer" among the Manicheans and remained so for some nine years.

In 374 Augustine travelled back to Tagaste and taught grammar and Latin literature, returning after one year to Carthage to establish a school of rhetoric. In Carthage he achieved some professional success and continued his search

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[7] Peter Brown, Augustine of Hippo, London, 1967, p. 42. This work, in addition to being a recent and scholarly biography, contains a thorough and up-to-date bibliography of the voluminous literature on Augustine.

[8] Frederick Copleston, S.J., A History of Philosophy, London, 1959, Vol. II, p. 41.

for wisdom. By 382 he had become partially disillusioned with the Manicheans and frustrated in his teaching. Rome seemed to offer more promise for advancement in his career and, after reckoning with the disapproval of Monica,[9] he set sail for Rome. Rome, however, proved to be a disappointment and after a year he was able to procure an appointment as professor of rhetoric for the city of Milan. For Augustine, Milan meant new interests, new possibilities for achievement and a new field in which to pursue his quest for wisdom.

Perhaps the most significant force on Augustine during his years in Milan came from the highly cultured Catholic bishop, Ambrose. It was largely through sermons rather than personal contact that Augustine felt the impact of Ambrose. As a teacher of rhetoric, Augustine was eager to hear the distinctive oratory of Ambrose and, after his arrival in Milan, Augustine quickly made his way to the church where the bishop preached. He found the style of preaching impressive, but he was even more taken by the content. Catholic Christianity, represented by Ambrose, with its strong other-worldly note, appeared to Augustine as quite revolutionary and was to be a strong influence in his understanding of the Christian faith.[10]

While in Milan Augustine also came into contact with a group of men who thought of themselves as taking part in a Renaissance of Platonic philosophy. They were heavily influenced by Plotinus, an Egyptian Greek who had taught in Rome,

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9 <u>Confessions</u>, V, viii, 15.
10 Brown, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 85.

dying there in 270. His work, The Enneads, had been put in more readable form by Porphyry and subsequently translated into Latin by Victorinus. The central concern of this group was to reconcile Platonic teaching and Christian theology. In the summer of 386 Augustine was introduced to these new ideas and this exposure helped him to solve some of his intellectual objections to Christianity. After several months of intellectual and moral struggle, during which he read parts of the New Testament as well as the neo-Platonic literature, he was converted to Christian faith. He says:

> I seized it [Paul's Epistles] and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: "not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites." I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled....You converted me to yourself, so that I no longer desired a wife or placed any hope in this world, but stood firmly upon the rule of faith....[11]

Augustine's career as a teacher of rhetoric had come to an end. He left his professorship and retired to Cassiciacum to integrate his new-found faith with his philsophical interests. His writing during this period shows a strong classical and neo-Platonic influence, though the epistles of Paul provide the essential foundation of his thought.

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11 Confessions, VIII, xii, 29-30.

Augustine was baptized in 387 by St. Ambrose and returned to Africa in 388. From 388-391 he continued his writing in a small monastic community near his original home. In 391 he moved to Hippo and became a priest, and in 396 he was made bishop, a position which he held until his death in 430.

While it would be pretentious to "sum up" so brilliant and many-sided a man as Augustine, it might be helpful to at least attempt, from this brief account of his life, to reconstruct the central influences in the formation of the preunderstanding which he brings to his historical interpretation of the Christian faith.

Perhaps most important was his exposure to the Bible. Augustine was firmly committed to biblical religion and consciously adopted what he believed to be the biblical view of history. He accepted the biblical affirmation that there is a sovereign God who is the moving force in the affairs of men, and it is this biblical theme which became the basic ideological framework out of which he worked. It functions as a major, positive influence on his interpretation. It tends to be comprehensive in its scope, going beyond its immediate application to his view of history, and blossoms into a full-fledged world view. It is consciously developed by Augustine in a consistent and rational way.

But Augustine's understanding of biblical teaching, like that of all Christians in any era, was formed in a specific historical context. The contours of Augustine's

belief are given shape by his environment and culture. The biblical categories are foundational, but the way he understands them and applies them is influenced by other assumptions which function less consistently and consciously in his thought. The assumption that God is sovereignly at work in history, for example, does not function independently of other ideological assumptions. There is of course his thorough exposure to classical culture with its presuppositions regarding man and his history. While the classical world view does not escape Augustine's critical scrutiny, its presence is still very much in evidence throughout his work.[12] It is perhaps most evident in his early writings, but can also be observed in his apologetic thrusts in The City of God which were designed for the sophisticated pagan reader of his time.

Not to be treated lightly either are his many years as a "Hearer" among the Manicheans. It is of particular importance to note the attraction which he had for the dualism of the Manichean system, especially as it provided a way in which to approach the problem of evil. Peter Brown remarks: "Yet just this Manichaeism had been Augustine's religion as a growing man. It has provided him with an extreme and distinctive mould for his feelings."[13]

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12 Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
13 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Moreover his serious reading of the neo-Platonic literature, especially at such a critical point in his life, inevitably left its mark. After his conversion, in an effort to obtain a better understanding of the Christian religion, he used "concepts and themes taken from neo-Platonic philosophy, his idea of Christianity being still very incomplete and tinctured, more than it was to be later, by neo-Platonism."[14]

The main attitudinal aspects of Augustine's preunderstanding grew out of his varied exposure to Catholic Christianity through his mother, Ambrose and the Christian church of his time with its unique problems in a crumbling empire. The foundational attitude in Augustine's preunderstanding was most obviously faith--faith in the God who is sovereignly in control of history and the destinies of men. Almost in defiance of the chaos in the Empire, Augustine confidently believed in the One who stands behind history and who promises eternal felicity to all who put their faith in Jesus Christ. While this attitude does not operate independently of other attitudes, it is certainly central and functions as a major influence on his interpretation of history.

Augustine's methodological assumptions are largely gleaned from the accepted approaches of scholarship in his time. In terms of historical study, he deviates very little from the standard practices of the classical historians.

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[14] Copleston, op. cit., pp. 43-44.

His evaluation of historical evidence, his use of sources and his understanding of historical causality all leave something to be desired. But these methodological assumptions do not constitute a major factor in his work.

Let us now move to consider how these ideological, attitudinal and methodological aspects of Augustine's pre-understanding help shape the specific presuppositions which undergird his understanding of history.

II. Augustine's Theology of History

Augustine's historical interpretation of the Christian faith, which "weighed with an almost physical pressure on the mind of Europe for a thousand years..."[15], is not based on inductions from allegedly observable trends in history nor on some philosophical discovery of an inner logic to the course of human affairs. It is more accurately described as a theology of history, based on the biblical revelation, which attempts to place the whole of universal history in a coherent pattern.[16]

The insights gained from the Bible caused Augustine to be critical of the classical view of history. In the development of his theology of history, Augustine jettisoned the central historical concepts of the Greco-Roman view.[17]

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15 G.P. Gooch, History and the Historians in the Nineteenth Century, London, 1913, p. 1.

16 Etienne Gilson, Introduction à L'Étude De Saint Augustin, Paris, 1943, p. 230. M. Gilson writes: "Pour la première fois, peut-être, dans cette oeuvre [De Civitate Dei] grâce à la lumière de la révélation qui lui dévoile l'origine et la fin cachées de l'universe, une raison humanine ose tenter la synthèse de l'histoire universelle."

17 Cochrane, op. cit., p. 384.

In the first place, because of his understanding of the biblical doctrine of sin, Augustine rejected the optimistic idea of the perfection of human nature and the possibility of establishing a reign of peace and happiness by the efforts of men. Secondly, on the basis of his understanding of the biblical teaching on creation and redemption, he could not accept the Greek idea of history as being an eternally recurrent cycle.[18] His idea of time having a beginning at the point of creation, of a divine purpose in history being worked out through the Hebrew nation in successive stages and the Christian experience of redemption through the unique events of Christ's death and resurrection all made it impossible for him to assent to the notion of cyclical patterns which characterized Greco-Roman historiography.

Augustine's rejection of the classical understanding of history resulted in the ascendancy of certain biblical themes in his own development of a doctrine of history.[19] He viewed the historical process as the working out not of man's purposes but of God's purposes. God, not man, was the moving force behind history. Hence the actions of historical agents, indeed, even their very nature and existence, are a product of the unfolding of a providential plan and are therefore historically important. In addition, Augustine's theology of history, because of his understanding of the equality

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18 See Collingwood, op. cit., pp. 46-48.

19 Ibid.

of all men before God, was universal in scope. It overcame the particularism characteristic of the classical view.

Collingwood's summary of Christian historiography into four categories provides a good summary of the central presuppositions guiding Augustine's view:[20] (1) It will be a universal history, or a history of the world, going back to man's origin. (2) It will understand events not as the working of human agents, but as the working of Providence. (3) It will attempt to detect an intelligible pattern in the general flow of events, and in particular it will assign primary significance in this pattern to Christ whose life, death and resurrection give it all meaning. (4) It will subdivide history into periods, seeing the progressive development of the divine plan in the course of human affairs. Augustine's analysis of history shares all these characteristics.

It would not be accurate to imply that Augustine's rejection of the classical view of history was total. While it is true that he rejected its basic features in light of his formulation of the biblical doctrines of creation, sin and redemption, he did maintain in some measure the substantialistic idea of eternal entities underlying the process of historical change. But this presupposition of historical understanding was retained with an important difference, namely that a personal God was the source of the eternal entities. Nevertheless the purpose and plan of God for

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20 Ibid., pp. 49-50.

history as revealed in the Bible is shown to fulfill itself within a Platonic universe. While not wanting to overstress this influence, it is still fair to say that for Augustine, "biblical history is Platonic Idealism in time."[21]

Still another basic presupposition of Augustine's historical understanding is a dualism of two ages, or as he expresses it, of two cities. This dualism in Augustine's thought can be traced to a number of sources including the Bible, the other-worldly Christianity of his times and his exposure to Manicheanism.

It is now necessary to examine how these basic presuppositions, rooted in biblical, classical and dualistic thought, express themselves in The City of God in which Augustine explicitly sets forth his view of history.

Two years after the sack of Rome by Alaric the Goth in 410 A.D., Augustine began to write The City of God and would not complete it until 426. The initial occasion for its writing was to reply to the accusation that the Eternal City had fallen because the worship of the Roman gods had been abandoned in favor of an oriental superstition. Christianity had been blamed as the cause of the destruction by those who still took the pagan gods seriously. They argued that after the sack by Alaric, the pagan gods had deserted Rome due to the intrusion of those "atheists" called Christians who had suppressed and abolished the cults of the

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21 John H.S. Burleigh, The City of God, London, 1949, p. 190.

Roman gods.[22] Augustine's reply was that long before the rise of Christianity Rome had suffered similar disasters, and that polytheistic worship does not assure world prosperity. For Augustine, the real significance of Rome was to preserve earthly peace as the condition for spreading the gospel.[23] The empires and states have been constituted because of man's sin, and their value consists in the preservation of peace and justice.

But the scope of Augustine's work went far beyond the apologetic impulse to defend the Christian faith against these accusations. He simply used this as an occasion for developing a "vast synthesis which embraces the history of the whole human race at its destinies in time and eternity."[24] The real issue was the way in which God intervened in human history to accomplish his divine purpose. It is God who has made all things and who administers the course of historical events. To know his will is to understand history, and that will is revealed in the divine acts, judgments and promises recorded in Scripture.[25] Hence _The City of God_ is a definitive rejection of the paganism of an aristocracy which had claimed to dominate the intellectual life of Augustine's age and a projection of a totally new world view based on the Bible.

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22 Karl Löwith, _Meaning in History_, Chicago, 1955, p. 168.

23 _The City of God_, XVIII, 46.

24 Christopher Dawson, _A Monument to Saint Augustine_, compiled by T.B. Burns, London, 1945, p. 43.

25 Burleigh, _op. cit._, p. 195.

As a result

> The City of God is the most self-conscious book that he ever wrote. It was planned ahead on a massive scale: five books dealt with those who worshipped the gods for felicity on earth; five, with those who worshipped them for eternal felicity; the remaining twelve would elaborate Augustine's great theme; four would deal with the origin of "Two cities, one of God, the other of the world"; four with their "unfolding course" in the past; four with their ultimate destinies.[26]

Augustine, then, builds his theology of history on a rejection of the classical view of the world, a reliance on the biblical record and a confidence in God who was displaying his purposes in the history of Augustine's own time and who would ultimately move history to its consummation.[27] The grand theme which holds these motifs together is a dualistic relationship between two cities as it is expressed in their origins, causes and ends. Augustine writes: "two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self."[28] In the earthly city there has been conflict and hate through all history from the fall of Adam and will be to the end of time. The heavenly city is planned by God to repair the damage of sin, and the whole of history since the ascension of Jesus into

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[26] Brown, op. cit., pp. 303-304.

[27] R.L.P. Milburn, Early Christian Interpretations of History, London, 1954, p. 74.

[28] The City of God, XIV, 28.

heaven is concerned with one work only: the building and perfecting of the city of God.[29]

The first two sections of The City of God contain his refutation of the classical view of the world and its belief in and reliance upon the pagan gods. These ten books constitute a detailed argument against all those who would maintain that the pagan gods can bring man temporal or eternal felicity. The unhappiness caused by the calamities of Rome's recent past are not the result of the departure of the pagan gods due to the presence of the Christian religion. Rather the calamities are directly related to the behavior of the Roman citizens who have brought disaster upon themselves by the corruptions of their souls and their pagan worship. These disasters happened to them before the dawn of the Christian religion which means that no blame can be placed on its introduction into the Empire. If the Empire is lost, it is the judgment of God who rules the course of history implementing His purposes. Nor can one place blame on blind fate. What the pagans call Fortuna, chance or luck, is only what is hidden from us, not from God. There is no such thing as accident or uncaused occurrence in the universe. All history is controlled by the rational purpose of God.[30] True happiness for man then can only come from the sovereign God who, out of

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29 Merton, op. cit., p. xii.

30 The City of God, V, 9.

his infinite love, has redeemed man by sending a mediator, "the man Christ Jesus."[31]

Because Augustine views history as standing under the authority of God, he is able to offer a critique of the prevailing political institutions. Rome has prospered in the past because she has been just, but now, in her failure to fulfill her divinely appointed function, she faces the judgment of God who has the power to create and dispose of the Kingdoms of earth. Augustine writes that

> therefore God, the author and giver of felicity, because He alone is the true God, Himself gives earthly Kingdoms both to good and bad. Neither does He do this rashly, and, as it were, fortuitously--because He is God, not fortune--but according to the order of things and times which is hidden from us, but thoroughly known to Himself; which same order of times, however, He does not serve as subject to it, but Himself rules as Lord and appoints as governor. Felicity He gives only to the good.[32]

In the next section, Books XI-XIV, he deals with the origin of the two cities. The story is well known and we need only repeat it here in outline form. Originally the City of God was designed as an angelic community to which innocent men like Adam before the Fall would be admitted. These angels were created by God with freewill, i.e. they were "able not to sin". Lucifer, one of the angels, led a revolt in heaven against God and he and his cohorts were

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31 Ibid., IX, 17.
32 Ibid., IV, 33.

cast into Hell, Lucifer becoming Satan in the process. Man too was created with free will ("able not to sin"), but after Adam's sin, he and his race became corrupt and were subject to death and the influence of the wicked angels, now devils. The good angels remain in the City of God and the rebellious ones in the City of Satan, both cities transcending the boundaries of this world, yet using man's history as their battleground. On earth the inhabitants of the two cities live intermingled in body, though separated in will because of their different natures.[33] Thus, says Augustine, "two cities, one of sinners and one of saints, are to be found throughout history from the creation of mankind until the end of the world: at the present day they are mingled together in body, but separate and distinct in will; in the day of judgment they will be separated bodily."[34]

Woven into this cosmology are the basic presuppositions which hold Augustine's theology of history together. In a harmonious combination of Platonic thought (via Neoplatonism) and biblical categories, Augustine sees God as omniscient, the knower of all that was, is and will be. He knew from all eternity the events which would occur in the created world, good as well as evil. Nevertheless God created the world and time (simultaneously) and man and saw that it was good. It is good because all is in the Eternal now for God; with God there is no beginning and end, and He sees in the present

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[33] Frank E. Manuel, Shapes of Philosophical History, London, 1965, p. 27.

[34] De catechizandos rudibus, London, 1896, p. 31.

His final triumph. Of God Augustine says:

> For He does not pass from this to that by transition of thought but beholds all things with absolute unchangeableness: so that of those things that emerge in time, the future are indeed not yet, the present are now, and the past no longer are: but all these are by Him comprehended in His stable and eternal presence.[35]

But, it might be asked, does this kind of omniscience in God make Him the only one responsible in history? Augustine replies in the negative as he gives what he considers to be a Christian answer to the problem of evil which he first understood in the categories of Manichean dualism. Man has free will to love God and be saved or to love self and be lost. God has foreseen that the archetypal first man, Adam, would sin and that a means of redemption would be necessary which has been provided through Christ. But why does God allow it all to happen? He allows it "to show what evil could be wrought by their pride, and what good by His grace."[36] Thus the purpose of human history is the denouement of the cosmic drama, the theme of which is the struggle between the two cities. All subsequent history is for the purpose of fulfilling God's plan which involves the conquest of Satan and his followers and victory and blessedness for the redeemed of the City of God.[37]

In Books XV-XVIII Augustine describes in this dualistic

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[35] The City of God, XI, 2.

[36] Ibid., XIV, 27.

[37] Grace Cairns, Philosophies of History, London, 1962, pp. 252-254.

framework the course of the two cities which provides the substance of his understanding of the history of man. The history of man, as Augustine describes it, is the conflict between Civitas Dei and Civitas Terrena, each of which has a particular species of man represented by Cain and Abel. Augustine explains that "of these two first parents of the human race, then, Cain was the first-born and he belonged to the city of men; after him was born Abel, who belonged to the city of God."[38] Between the two cities and their races there is the age-long conflict of unbelief and faith, of love of self and the contempt of God, of the contempt of self and love of God, men of strife and men of peace. The men of the earthly city are enslaved by their concupiscence and are unable to see further than their own desires. They lead turbulent lives in the effort to appease their lusts. The earthly city has its

> good in this world, and rejoices in it with such joy as such things can afford. But as this is not a good which can discharge its devotees of all distresses, this city is often divided against itself by litigations, wars, quarrels, and such victories as are either life-destroying or short lived.[39]

The men of the City of God, on the other hand, even during their sojourn on earth, are already possessed by the divine spirit of peace as they look beyond this world to everlasting life in heaven. This age long struggle between the

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[38] The City of God, XV, 4.

[39] Ibid., XV, 4.

children of the flesh and the children of the promise serves the overall purpose of vindicating God in history.

The salvation of those destined for the City of God is brought about by God's chosen people, the Hebrews. Therefore Augustine divides human history into periods in accordance with the epochal events of Hebrew history as recorded in Scripture. Augustine's division consists of six epochs: (1) from Adam to Noah and the Flood; (2) from Noah to Abraham; (3) from Abraham to David; (4) from David to the Exile; (5) from the Exile to the birth of Christ; and (6) the present epoch, the age of the church. The pivotal event, the climax of history according to Augustine, is the advent of Christ through whom God redeems fallen man.

In his description of history Augustine is not primarily interested in secular history. For "Gentile" history, he contents himself with a two-monarchies theory, the reigns of Babylon and Rome covering the whole span of time. The history of the Gentiles is merely tributary to the history of Israel and the church. It is important "only insofar as it affects them either as a scourge of God for sin or as an agent helping in the attainment of necessary ends among the chosen people."[40] Augustine's central concern is with the

> eschatological history of faith, which is, as it were, a secret history within secular history, subterranean and invisible to those who have not the eyes

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[40] Manuel, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., p. 30.

> of faith. The whole course of history becomes progressive, meaningful, and intelligible only by the expectation of a final triumph, beyond historical time, of the City of God over the city of sinful men.[41]

Because of his view of secular history, Augustine rejects the notion of progress in history toward an earthly paradise. He argues against the millenarians that the eternal sabbath which was to follow the end of the sixth period will not be of this earth. Whatever perfectibility there is in this world is the individual spiritual perfection of the elect of the City of God. There is no conception of the perfection of mankind in its totality through time.[42] What really matters is not the transitory greatness of empires, but salvation or damnation in a world to come. The earthly state has the task of ordering human affairs on the basis of law so that in peace and freedom men may learn to be disciples and receive the privilege of membership in the City of God. Augustine rejects any concept which would suggest divinity of the state and provides a critique of all idolatrous pretensions of political religion. The state is not the goal of history; it exists only for the well being of its subjects.

In his final section, Books XIX-XXII, Augustine discusses the ultimate destinies of the two cities. In Book

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41 Löwith, op. cit., pp. 71-72.

42 Manuel, op. cit., p. 31.

XIX he sets the stage for describing their final end by arguing against the opinions of the philosophers who maintained that it is possible to make for themselves a happiness in this life. He refutes this view by asserting that true peace and happiness belong only to the heavenly city and the people of Christ. True happiness will never be found by attempts to construct an ideal future on this earth; eternal felicity is reserved for the saints of God.[43]

At the end of history when Christ shall return there will be a final judgment. The City of God will pass into eternity in the presence of God and the City of Satan will be a city of eternal torture for the fallen angels and the great numbers of fallen men. At the final resurrection the redeemed will receive incorruptible bodies and live in eternal happiness with God. "There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. This is what shall be in the end without end."[44] The damned will receive bodies also in order that they might feel more intensely their eternal tortures.[45] Thus are the destinies of the two cities decided.

III. Summary and Evaluation

It is nearly impossible to pull together in summary form all that Augustine puts forward in his theology of history. Yet some attempt to list the important themes and

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[43] The City of God, XIX, 11.
[44] Ibid., XXII, 30.
[45] Ibid., XXI, 10.

their relationship to his preunderstanding may be helpful.[46] In the first place, Augustine's City of God may be seen as a polemic against the Greco-Roman world view. It is a careful criticism of the prevailing preunderstanding of his time. Augustine argues against the classical notion of time as an eternal cycle, as an endless process of destruction and regeneration of the cosmos. He rejects all theories of chance and fate and refutes the notion that Christianity was in some way responsible for the downfall of the Roman Empire. His understanding of the nature of human sin does not allow him to be optimistic about the possibilities of a stable and lasting peace for men in Civitas Terrena. Successive empires have failed to provide it; their only value is to impose justice, check human sinfulness and make possible partial peace between the two cities so that men and women may be recruited for the Heavenly City. When the state claims a loyalty which is due only to God, then it will stand under the judgment of God.

Secondly, Augustine's theology of history may be viewed as a vindication of God's purpose in and for the world. Because history is providentially directed, it has a goal, an end which is realized not by progressive perfection in time, but by the process of God's activity in the affairs of men as recorded in the Bible. By itself, temporal history is a narrative of miseries and yet, viewed from the perspective of

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[46] See Burleigh, op. cit., pp. 203-216.

the providential design, it conspires for the good as willed by God for His creation. The ordering of events in history is fair and reasonable if due consideration be given to the ends for which God created the world. There is a trans-historical meaning to the sequence of the development of events in time.[47] History, apart from the data of revelation, is shorn of any significance.

Thirdly, Augustine's view may be understood as the dialectic between the two cities stretched across the epochs of biblical history. In the development of this theme Augustine attempts to adapt Manichean and Platonic dualism to fit a Christian frame of reference. Augustine selects this element in the life story of mankind because he believes it to be central and to contain the clue to its meaning. History is the place where the two cities intermingle and run their respective courses concurrently.

Finally, Augustine's understanding of historical processes is never completely free from the influence of his classical training. History, for Augustine, remains the arena in which the eternal entities are expressed in time. The overarching purpose of God for history fulfills itself within a Platonic universe. History is meaningful because by its processes God is fitting His people in all generations for fellowship and citizenship in the eternal city.

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[47] Jacques Maritain, <u>On the Philosophy of History</u>, London, 1959, p. 2.

If this is the way his preunderstanding expresses itself in the central themes of The City of God, then how are we to evaluate it as a theology of history? Is it an adequate historical interpretation of the Christian faith? On the positive side, so much has been written that we hardly need add to it. We will be content with a few summary remarks. First, Augustine's City of God has great stylistic merit and imaginative power. It rises above the literature of his time because Augustine was both a master of the written word and a creative and original thinker. Second, it provides us with a cogent critique of classical culture by one who was immersed in it. In reading The City of God we are treated to a "bird's eye" view of the impotence of classical culture in the face of social and political disintegration. Third, in its rejection of all utopian schemes of perfection in history and its attack on all idolatrous political institutions, The City of God offers universal insights valid for all time, not just for the declining years of the Roman Empire. Finally, in its affirmation of God's sovereignty, it directs us to look beyond the course of human events to find an anchor for our hope.

While Augustine's positive contribution to historical understanding makes whatever negative comment we may have seem small indeed, we would still be amiss not to suggest some reservations about his views. There are four in number and can be stated briefly: (1) Only in theory does he do

justice to secular history. In actual practice he devotes little attention to it, and it is the least carefully finished and worst proportioned of his work. He does not deny that God's sovereignty extends over the whole of human history, but he so emphasizes the events of redemptive history that world history is nearly ignored. (2) Though his preunderstanding is essentially opposed to the classical view of history, Augustine's historiographical method remains largely unchanged from it. He still depends heavily upon tradition for his facts and has no effective historical weapons to use in sorting out fact from fancy. Augustine can hardly be blamed for this weakness in that the discipline of history was as yet undeveloped. But it does nevertheless mean that he fails to do justice to the distinctly historical problems which his view raises. (3) He nearly falls into the trap of identifying the earthly church with the City of God. We say "nearly" because he makes no simple one to one identification. "But", says Reinhold Niebuhr, "on the whole he identifies the Civitas Dei with the historical church.... He does surround this identification with all kinds of qualifications.... Nevertheless the church is, despite these qualifications, in some sense the Kingdom of God on earth."[48] This means that at no point does he conceive of the church as standing under the judgment of God. (4) Lastly, his emphasis on human sinfulness does not allow him to place value at the points

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[48] The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. II, p. 138.

in human history where there has been genuine achievement.

In conclusion we should return to our theme of preunderstanding for one final comment. While Augustine's work reflects a historical approach subject to the influence and limitations of his place and time in history, his unshakable faith in the providence of God (his basic preunderstanding) raises his theology of history above the level of a mere curiosity of an ancient culture and gives it lasting value.

Chapter Seven

Historical Interpretation During the Enlightenment

Edward Gibbon

I. From Augustine to the Enlightenment

We began our assessment of the influence of preunderstanding on selected historical interpretations of the Christian faith by examining Augustine's theology of history as it is put forward in The City of God. We saw that the primary factor in Augustine's preunderstanding which affected his interpretation was that he viewed the historical dimension of Christianity from within Christian faith and more particularly as the product of God's sovereign control over history. By way of contrast we turn now to consider a historian, Edward Gibbon, who understands the historical aspect of Christianity from an entirely dissimilar preunderstanding, a preunderstanding molded by a different purpose,[1] another era of history and by a contrasting world view. But before we can deal directly and adequately with Gibbon, we must first sketch in general terms the presuppositions which guided the development of historical interpretation from Augustine

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[1] We acknowledge that Gibbon's purpose was not primarily to give a historical interpretation of the Christian faith, but to discuss the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Nevertheless we include Gibbon in our discussion for three reasons: (1) His work illustrates that purpose itself is a presuppositional factor to be accounted for in analyzing a particular historical interpretation. (2) Though it is not his central concern, he does give us a historical treatment of Christianity. (3) He is an excellent example of one who operates outside of faith in his discussion of the Christian religion.

to the Enlightenment.

With Augustine the idea of universal history was born. He saw the fall of Rome as one episode in the unfolding plan and purpose of God for human history. For Augustine the world, not merely the Roman world, had a single history directed by divine providence. This preunderstanding of Augustine's, that history is both universal and providentially directed, greatly influenced medieval historiography. In the Middle Ages history was seen as "the realization of the eternal, transtemporal divine plan. It was a plan in which all temporal, worldly events not only had their unity but also were grounded in the divine reality."[2] This was the guiding preunderstanding of medieval historiography. The essential theme of history so conceived was the salvation of men, a cosmic drama which began in heaven and would end there. Because medieval man was primarily interested in the history of salvation, he had little appreciation for "secular" history and historical research. History was more something to be received from the Bible than it was something to be investigated. Even in biblical history the medievalist saw no patterns pointing to a progressive and unfolding revelation. The plan of salvation was as well-known to Abraham as it was to Paul. What was spelled out clearly in the New Testament was latent in the Old Testament and could be discovered

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2 Friedrich Gogarten, The Reality of Faith, tr. by Carl Michalson and others, Philadelphia, 1959, p. 22.

by allegorical interpretation.[3] Medieval historiography had no way of studying the growth of the various traditions which had come down to their time or analyzing them into their component parts. The great task of the historian was not analysis or encounter with history but discovering, systematizing and expounding the universal divine plan given in the propositional truths of Scripture.[4]

As the Middle Ages passed into the Renaissance several important presuppositional changes were beginning to take place in historical writing. First, there was a return to a humanistic view of history based on the historiography of the classical writers. Whereas the medieval historian was concerned to describe human history as the unfolding of a divine plan with God as the chief actor, the Renaissance historian elevated man to the center of historical thought. One positive result which came from Renaissance man-centeredness was a clearing away of much that had been fanciful and ill-founded in medieval historiography. Yet in the process they began the trend in historical thinking of excluding the notion that God can be judged to be an agent in human history, a trend which continues to our day. A second change, arising in part from the elevation of man to the place of central importance in historical inquiry, was an increasingly, but by no means modern, critical attitude toward historical

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3 Richardson, History Sacred and Profane, p. 66.
4 Collingwood, op. cit., pp. 52-53.

sources, and in particular those sources which emphasized the intervention of supernatural beings or God. This new critical attitude led to a third basic shift in the historical thought of the Renaissance, namely a general skepticism about historical knowledge. Montaigne, writing about 1572, voices the opinion of his age:

> I sometimes wonder whether it can be right for a prudent theologian, philosopher or other such person of precise and delicate conscience to write history. How can they pledge their word on a popular belief? How can they answer for the thoughts of unknown persons, and advance their own conjectures as valid coin?[5]

The general view was that historical facts were too fragmentary and uncertain to provide a genuine knowledge of the past. Still another way in which Renaissance historical writing differed at least in emphasis from medieval historiography was the manner in which history was to be used. The basic purpose of history in the Middle Ages was, upon the discovery of providential activity in human affairs, to praise God for this intervention. The study of history was for the glory of God. In short it was God-centered. But in the Renaissance the primary value of history, in that it does not give any sure and final knowledge, resided in the moral and political lessons which could be drawn from it. It is true that moral lessons were drawn by the

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5 Michael de Montaigne, Essays, tr. by J.M. Cohen, London, 1958, p. 47.

medieval historians, but this was a secondary function and their nature was largely pious. However in the Renaissance the lessons drawn from history were humanistic and pragmatic. The behavior and fate of those who have gone before, whose record has been preserved by the historian, provided personal instruction and political wisdom. Montaigne writes:

> Let a tutor remember the purpose of his duties, and impress upon his pupil the qualities of Hannibal and Scipio rather than the date of the fall of Carthage, and not so much where Marcellus died as why it was inconsistent with his duty that he should die there.[6]

One final difference between medieval and Renaissance historiography was their subject matter. The medievalist was primarily concerned with sacred history, with those events where God was active in bringing about the salvation of man. Renaissance historiography, on the other hand, was concerned with secular history, and particularly the history of Greece and Rome, the two civilizations which were seen as the high point of human existence.

These presuppositional changes in historiography which came about in the Renaissance were continued and developed in the Age of Natural Science (1600-1690). Generally in this era men looked to the new science with its empirical methodology and the new philosophy with its rational systems rather than to history for knowledge. The philosopher Descartes (1596-1650), whose thought emphasized doubting all

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[6] Ibid., p. 62.

but the absolutely clear idea of intuition, helped set the tone for the age and for the devaluation of historical writing which followed.[7]

In the era of the Enlightenment, a period usually dated from the appearance of Locke's Essay on Human Understanding in 1690 and terminating with the publication of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason in 1781, historiography continued to follow the lead of the philosophers, who, as they had in Descartes' time, largely determined the intellectual climate of their day. In fact the best historians of the period were generally philosophers first and historians second. It was these men who defined the scope and purpose of historical writing. If we are to understand Edward Gibbon's historical treatment of the Christian religion and the preunderstanding which guided it, it is necessary to know the distinctive features of the age of which he is a part.

Perhaps the essential characteristic of the period was man's confidence in his own ability to understand and order his environment by his reason so that he might achieve fulfillment. The earlier work of Copernicus, Galileo and Newton in science, and of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz in philosophy gave to the men of the Enlightenment the courage to make use of their understanding without feeling dependent upon an authority outside of themselves. Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789) summed up the mood of the era as an attempt

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[7] See below in Chapter 14 for an analysis of Spinoza's historical approach to Scripture which reflects the influence of Descartes.

"to inspire man with a respect for his own reason so that he may no longer be duped by an imagination that has been led astray by authority, by the prejudices of his childhood, and thus may learn to base his morals on his own nature, on his own wants, on the real advantage of society so that he may become a virtuous and rational being, who cannot fail to become happy."[8]

This confidence in science and reason produced a definitely anti-historical mentality. History could not claim to be an exact science and must inevitably falsify the perspective of the past. The accumulation of historical information for its own sake was considered a waste of time and intellect; history was useful only insofar as it correctly illustrated the essential principles of moral philosophy.

Coupled with man's confidence in his own ability to control his environment was the conscious attempt to secularize every department of human life and thought. One direction which this impulse took was toward an effort to emancipate man from the tutelage of institutional religion and from religion itself. There was a general revolt against the power of religion in the minds of men and an attempt to inaugurate a non-religious rational era. Frequently this polemical attitude toward religion with its concomitant emphasis on man's reason was excessive and one-sided. The man of the Enlightenment was often not sufficiently interested

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[8] Quoted by Waller I. Wallbank & Alastair M. Taylor, Civilization Past and Present, Chicago, 1960, Vol. II, p. 39.

in history for its own sake. Because of his anti-religious bias and his narrow understanding of reason he had no appreciation for, and therefore little insight into, what from his vantage point were non-rational periods of human history. Usually he became interested in history only at the point where it began to be the history of the modern spirit which was not unlike his own.[9] As a result he had little conception of historical movements and institutions as being created by the spirit of a people and no grasp of the gradual historical development of events in their constellation of causes. All too frequently he based his historical interpretation on the notion that human activity prior to his own time was a blind, irrational business, but which now had the potential of being changed into something rational by man's effort.

Two of the best minds and most able representatives of the Enlightenment, Voltaire (1694-1778) and Hume (1711-1776), took pen in hand to write history. Both men used a technique for historical investigation which was advanced for their day. Voltaire's particular contributions to historiography were his displacement of Western Europe as the center of the globe and his appreciation of the arts, sciences and social institutions as important historical factors.[10] Hume's contribution was his insistence on the necessity of the historian's

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[9] Collingwood, op. cit., p. 78.

[10] J. H. Brumfitt, Voltaire: Historian, London, 1958, p. 165.

impartiality. "The first quality of an historian", said Hume in a letter, "is to be impartial."[11] Yet, capable as these men were, they nevertheless shared in two major weaknesses characteristic of the historiography of the era. In the first place, they failed to grasp the importance and need of objective research in historical writing. While they did not consciously distort facts, neither were they researchers, and they had little respect for facts as sacred in their own right. Hume's "impartial history" seldom consisted of letting the facts speak their own truth; more often he gave them a philosophical interpretation according to the dictates of his philosophy. Both used history as a means to warn man about his refusal to live according to reason and to illustrate the follies of religion. Secondly, neither man effectively solved the problems of historical causation. Economic factors were ignored, and there was a general reliance on mechanical explanations rather than truly historical ones. Voltaire in particular saw history as the story of the decline and fall from a golden age of reason, nobility and simplicity, an altogether too simple scheme for historical explanation. Hume failed because of his static view of human nature. He believed he could apply the methodology of science to history as a means of uncovering universal laws of human behavior.[12] Once discovered, these laws would make the task of historical causation a simple

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[11] Quoted by J. B. Black, <u>The Art of History</u>, London, 1926, p. 91.

[12] David Hume, <u>A Treatise of Human Nature</u>, ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge, London, 1960, <u>passim</u>.

affair. But the complexity of human nature frustrates simple schemes, and Hume's generalizations are not convincing.

II. A Life Sketch of Edward Gibbon

It was into this milieu of the Enlightenment that Edward Gibbon was born on April 27, 1737, in Putney near London, the eldest of seven children.[13] The Gibbons were a good English family living in circumstances of comfort, though not wealth. Gibbon's childhood years were plagued by poor health and as a result his education was hindered, being largely limited to infrequent attendance in the school at Westminster and the guidance of an aunt, Mrs. Catherine Porten. It was Mrs. Porten who introduced Gibbon to Pope's translations of the _Iliad_ and the _Odyssey_ and the _Arabian Night's Entertainment_, and generally encouraged him in his other reading. Later in life Gibbon was to think of his aunt as "the true mother of my mind as well as my health" and write somewhat sentimentally: "But the maternal office was supplied by my aunt, Mrs. Catherine Porten, at whose name I feel a tear of gratitude trickling down my cheek."[14]

As a boy Gibbon was a voracious reader of classic and historical literature. His imagination was stirred by the "barbaric splendor" of Oriental history and he was fascinated by the Persians, Moslems and Byzantines. He read the _Universal_

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[13] A recent biography of Gibbon is Sir Gavin de Beer's _Gibbon and His World_, London, 1967.

[14] _Autobiography_, ed. by Oliphant Smeaton, London, (no date given), p. 23.

History, translations of Heroditus, Tacitus, Machiavelli and Fra Paolo, descriptions of China, Mexico and Peru and was particularly delighted with Roman history.[15] But because of this somewhat indiscriminate reading he was not an excellent student and learned only adequately Greek and Latin and studied no German which he considered to be uncivilized.

At sixteen his father enrolled him as a gentleman commoner at Magdalen College, Oxford. Gibbon was not prepared for such an educational experience and idled away the time, leaving after fourteen months. He writes concerning his experience at Oxford: "To the university of Oxford, I acknowledge no obligation; and she will cheerfully renounce me for a son as I am willing to disclaim her for a mother. I spent fourteen months at Magdalen College; they proved the fourteen months the most idle and unprofitable of my whole life."[16] While at Oxford Gibbon kept alive an interest in religious argument[17] and began reading some Roman Catholic literature which included Bossuet's Exposition of the Catholic Doctrine and the History of the Protestant Variations. Under the spell of this literature and with a deep respect for the church of the Fathers and the majestic unity and antiquity of Rome, Gibbon became a Roman Catholic.[18]

When he left Oxford he was sent abroad by his father

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15 G. M. Young, Gibbon, London, 1932, p. 8.

16 Quoted by James Westfall Thompson, A History of Historical Writing, New York, 1942, Vol. II, p. 76.

17 Gibbon, Autobiography, p. 50. "From my childhood I had been fond of religious disputation...."

18 Young, op. cit., p. 8.

to Lausanne where he was tutored by a M. Pavilliard, a Calvinist minister, whose task it was to continue the young Gibbon's education and to bring him back to the Protestant faith. The religious episode was liquidated in eighteen months of earnest but polite debate with his Swiss tutor. One of his biographers writes that "the only permanent consequence of his lapse and recovery was a delight in the refinements of theological debate, and a profound conviction of the worthlessness of religious emotion."[19] Later Gibbon was to reflect on Bayle's similar course, from Protestantism to Rome and from Rome to a universal Protestantism of his own making, and Bayle's remark that "_Je suis protestant, car je proteste contre toutes les religions_."

At Lausanne Gibbon learned French, studied the classics and French thought, overcame some of his Greek and Latin deficiencies, was exposed to mathematics, logic and international law and had the opportunity to meet and converse with his neighbor Voltaire. In his reading he was especially impressed with Pascal's style and the works of Montesquieu. He later wrote concerning Montesquieu: "My delight was in the frequent perusal of Montesquieu, whose energy of style, and boldness of hypothesis, were powerful to awaken and stimulate the genius of the age."[20] It was Montesquieu who first clearly apprehended the importance of impersonal causes in history, an insight of which Gibbon was later to avail himself.

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[19] _Ibid._, p. 13.

[20] _Autobiography_, p. 72.

Gibbon also read Grannone's History of Naples and, as he remarked in his Autobiography, "observed with a critical eye the progress and abuse of sacerdotal power...."[21] In general, Gibbon's five year stay in Lausanne had two important affects: (1) It laid the foundation of his historical knowledge, and (2) it gave a genuinely European mold to his thought.[22]

When Gibbon returned to England he took up residence in London with the thought of launching a career as an author and produced as a first effort the Essay on the Study of Literature. Shortly after the publication of this essay he joined the military which occupied him for two and one-half years. After his release from the service he returned to Europe, stopping first in Paris where he met the foremost philosophers, d'Alembert, Diderot, Raynal, Helvetius and d'Holbach. This exposure to skeptical French thought plus his earlier training in Lausanne gave his preunderstanding its permanent mold.

After Paris and a brief stay in Lausanne he traveled south to Rome where he made the decision of his life's work. He had considered being an historian for a number of years and even developed in outline form several historical projects, but the arrival in Rome settled his mind. He later recorded his impressions of seeing Rome for the first time:

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[21] Ibid., p. 73.

[22] James C. Morison, Gibbon, London, 1878, pp. 21-22.

> My temper is not very susceptible of enthusiasms, and the enthusiasm I do not feel I have ever scorned to affect. But at the distance of twenty-five years I can neither forget nor express the strong emotions which agitated my mind as I first approached and entered the Eternal City. After a sleepless night, I trod with a lofty step the ruins of the Forum. Each memorable spot where Romulus stood, or Tully spoke, or Caesar fell, was at once present to my eye, and several days of intoxication were lost and enjoyed before I could descend to a cool and minute examination.[23]

It was here, while his classically trained mind was under the intoxicating grip of Rome, that Gibbon decided to write The Decline and Fall. He leaves us a record of his decision: "It was at Rome on the 15th day of October, 1764, as I sat musing amid the ruins of the Capitol, while bare-footed fryars [sic] were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started in my mind."[24]

His original design was to limit the subject to the decay of the city of Rome, but gradually he began to see the whole grand scheme. At twenty-eight he returned to London and, telling no one, set about writing The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. His father's death had left him independent means and he was able to pursue his project without interruption. The first volume appeared in 1776 and at once established Gibbon as a success, though the controversial chapters fifteen and sixteen gave rise to a storm of criticism.

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[23] Autobiography, p. 122.

[24] Ibid., p. 124.

Volumes II and III appeared in 1781. He finished Volume IV in France and the final volume was completed and published in 1788. Gibbon died at fifty-seven in 1794.

This summary of the life and environment of Gibbon gives us some clue to the preunderstanding which influenced Gibbon's historical writing and which informs his interpretation of the Christian religion. Most obviously Gibbon is a man of his age. His preunderstanding is shaped by the main intellectual currents of the Enlightenment. His education and culture were chiefly French and his opinions were influenced by the leading French _philosophes_ of the last half of the eighteenth century whose outlooks were essentially rationalistic and anti-religious. This basic Enlightenment world view suggested the specific preunderstanding with which Gibbon interprets the Christian faith. We might summarize its essential characteristics as follows:

1. The informational element of course can be traced to the influence of his family, his education while at Oxford and at Lausanne, and generally his life-long interest in, if not commitment to, Christian thought. Though it is obvious, we should perhaps remind ourselves that the source, the kind, and the amount of information one possesses about any given subject is the most basic form of preunderstanding. How Gibbon interpreted the Christian faith depended in some measure on what he knew about it.

2. Ideologically, Gibbon is a rationalist. Reason itself,

Gibbon believed, is the source of knowledge and hence the best guide to historical understanding. It alone is able to judge historical evidences. This rationalistic note, functioning as a comprehensive world view, becomes perhaps the major influence on his interpretation. It operates consistently and consciously, though perhaps somewhat closed-mindedly throughout his work. It has a negative affect on his views at the point where it becomes closed-minded, i.e. where Gibbon is intolerant of historical eras with value systems at variance with his own.

3. Attitudinally, Gibbon is both anti-religious and romantic. These two attitudes tend to be dependent upon each other in an interesting way. In the first place, he stands antagonistically outside of faith as he interprets the Christian religion. Gibbon agreed with his contemporaries, Voltaire, Helvetius and d'Holbach, that the past was one long nightmare of crime and folly instigated by the selfish motives of the church and its priests. In the second place we notice that Gibbon had read and been fascinated by the classics and the culture which produced them. As a result he nursed romantic illusions about the glory that was Rome. He conceived of one certain period (e.g. the Age of the Antonines) as the pristine age of nobility, justice and simplicity. In old Rome lay his values, and anything which contributed to its decline and fall was considered an enemy. It is at this point that the two attitudes become complementary. Already feeling hostile towards

religion, Gibbon is easily able to supply the villain in Rome's decline and fall--Christianity. These two attitudes are major influences in his historical writing and function consistently and consciously throughout it. At the point where he deals specifically with Christianity, they become irrational and have a detrimental influence on his interpretation.

4. The historical method which Gibbon employs is, like his attitudes, not dissimilar to that of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries. His understanding of historical causation and his evaluation of sources lacks the sophistication of modern historical scholarship, but for this he can hardly be blamed. More important for our purpose is his methodological presupposition of golden age and corruption. This scheme is not integrated into the total structure of <u>The Decline and Fall</u> but does operate unconsciously at certain points along the way. Where it is present (e.g. Antonines vs. Christianity) it diminishes the value of his interpretation.

We must now turn to examine in more detail how his essentially Enlightenment preunderstanding manifests itself in his work. Our primary concern will be to evaluate the influence of his preunderstanding on his interpretation of Christianity, and only secondarily to consider its role in his treatment of the other aspects of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.

III. Gibbon the Historian

Gibbon as a historian must be measured, as we have stressed, in relation to the age in which he lived. Not even genius transcends the conditions of its time and it is obvious that Gibbon did not do so. He was a historian of the eighteenth century, a century which placed its faith in reason and viewed the past as one long exhibition of the play of irrational forces. He had read the historians of his time--Montfaricon, Tillemont, Robertson, Hume and Montesquieu--and brings to a logical conclusion the "new history" which they had begun. What sets Gibbon off from his contemporaries is not his point of view, but the disciplined research and massive scope of his work. No historian before Gibbon had paid such attention to details or had such a concept of the continuity of history.[25]

Characteristically, Gibbon conceives of history as anything but an example of human ability and wisdom. The clue to his understanding of history is given by Gibbon himself when he defines it as "little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind."[26] The moving force behind history is human irrationality, and his narrative displays what he calls the "triumph of barbarism and religion."[27] But in order for barbarism and religion to triumph there must be something for them to triumph over. For Gibbon it is the golden age of the Antonine period

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[25] Thompson, op. cit., p. 75.

[26] The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, ed. by J. B. Bury, London, 1900, Vol. I, p. 81.

[27] Ibid., Vol. VII, p. 320.

which he conceives to be the age in which reason ruled over a happy world.[28] Thus Gibbon begins his narrative:

> In the second century of the Christian era, the empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilized portion of mankind. The frontiers of the extensive monarchy were guarded by ancient renown and disciplined valour. The gentle, but powerful influence of laws and manners had gradually cemented the union of the provinces. Their peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury.[29]

The succeeding volumes are designed to trace the most important circumstances of the Empire's decline and fall from this golden era.

According to Gibbon, one of the chief causes for the decline and fall of Rome was the growth and progress of the Christian religion, and it is in this context that we may observe his analysis of Christianity. In chapters XV and XVI we find his now famous and still controversial interpretation. He writes:

> While the great body was invaded by open violence, or undermined by slow decay, a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new rigour from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the cross on the ruins of the capitol.[30]

To the tremendous growth of the Christian church and its detrimental effect on Rome Gibbon attributes five causes, all of which illustrate the preunderstanding which he brings

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[28] Collingwood, _op. cit._, p. 79.

[29] _Decline and Fall_, Vol. I, p. 1.

[30] _Ibid._, Vol. II, p. 1.

to his task. The first cause is "the inflexible, and, if we may use the expression, the intolerant zeal of the Christians, derived, it is true, from the Jewish religion, but purified from the narrow and unsocial spirit which, instead of inviting, had deterred the Gentiles from embracing the law of Moses."[31] This intolerant zeal expressed itself in zealous opposition, "a holy war" against the pagan gods and religious rites of the Empire, gradually undermining this aspect of Roman life. The second cause for the growth of Christianity was "the doctrine of a future life; improved by every additional circumstance which would give weight and efficacy to that important truth."[32] The early Christians, Gibbon argues, were animated by a contempt for their present life and by a desire for a future one. Using this promise as bait and threatening eternal punishment to any rejecting it, converts were not difficult to procure.

> The careless polytheist, [writes Gibbon], assailed by new and unexpected terrors, against which neither his priests nor his philosophers could afford him any certain protection, was very frequently terrified and subdued by the menace of eternal tortures. His fears might assist the progress of his faith and reason; and if he could once persuade himself to suspect that the Christian religion might possibly be true, it became an easy task to convince him that it was the safest and most prudent party that he could possibly embrace.[33]

A third cause for Christianity's growth was "the miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church."[34] Gibbon

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31 Ibid., p. 2.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., pp. 27-28.

34 Ibid., p. 2

himself of course rejects the notion of the miraculous, but acknowledges the susceptibility of people in an earlier and more primitive age to such accounts. He sums up his own position when he writes: "Accustomed long since to observe and to respect the invariable order of nature, our reason, or at least our imagination, is not sufficiently prepared to sustain the visible action of the Deity."[35] Cause number four consisted of "the pure and austere morals of the Christians."[36] According to Gibbon the controlling passion of the ancient Christians was to achieve a certain type of ascetic perfection. They rejected knowledge which was not useful to salvation, showed disdain for any levity of discourse, rejected bodily pleasures, censured all luxury, elevated to an ideal the state of celibacy and expressed an aversion to business, war and government. This pure and austere ideal of the Christian appealed to their pagan and degenerate contemporaries. The final cause for the growth of the Christian church was "the union and discipline of the Christian republic, which gradually formed an independent and increasing state in the heart of the Roman Empire."[37] The primitive Christians, because of their new faith, were at first dead to the business and pleasures of the world. But it was not long before their inherent desire for action revived, and its new channel was

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35 Ibid., p. 28.
36 Ibid., p. 2.
37 Ibid.

the government of the church. Church offices, ecclesiastical councils, the collection of revenue, the maintenance of church order and the propagation of the faith soon demanded all the energy of the Christians. Their efficiency and their failure to participate in civil affairs inevitably damaged the welfare of the Empire. Gibbon concludes this section with a descriptive summary of the inner dynamic of the five causes. He says:

> To the first of these the Christians were indebted for their invincible valour, which disdained to capitulate with the enemy whom they were resolved to vanquish. The three succeeding causes supplied their valour with the most formidable arms. The last of these causes united their courage, directed their arms, and gave their efforts that irresistible weight which even a small band of well-trained and intrepid volunteers has so often possessed over an undisciplined multitude, ignorant of the subject, and careless of the event of war.[38]

In chapter XVI Gibbon discusses the conduct of the Roman government towards the Christians in the period stretching from Nero to Constantine. The primary reason for the policy of persecution by the Roman government of the Christians in this era was due to the failure of the Christians to honor the basic values of Rome. It existed because "they [the Christians] dissolved the sacred ties of custom and education, violated the religious institutions of their country, and presumptuously despised whatever their fathers had believed as true, or had reverenced as sacred."[39] The Christians were seen as atheists and their assemblies were considered a dangerous conspiracy. The policy of persecution was a simple

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38 Ibid., p. 54.

39 Ibid., p. 75.

matter of self-protection. Gibbon summarizes the policy in four categories which he hopes will be a corrective to exaggerated accounts given in the ecclesiastical histories: (1) A considerable amount of time elapsed before the Roman government perceived the new sect as an object deserving attention. (2) The Roman officials, in light of the seriousness of the Christian's offense, proceeded for the most part with caution and reluctance. (3) They were moderate in the use of punishments. (4) The afflicted church enjoyed many intervals of peace and tranquility.[40] In general Gibbon is concerned to vindicate the Roman policy, correct the imprecise versions of the extent of Christian persecution and cast dispersions on the nobility of the Christians. On this latter point Gibbon allows his prejudice to show through. He wants no undue credit to go to the martyrs, and observed that more often than not "the soldiers of Christ, instead of distinguishing themselves by voluntary deeds of heroism, frequently deserted their posts and fled in confusion before the enemy whom it was their duty to resist."[41] He closes the chapter with one final broadside on Christian virtue:

> We conclude this chapter by a melancholy truth which obtrudes itself on the reluctant mind; that even admitting, without hesitation or inquiry, all that history has recorded, or devotion has feigned, on the subject of martyrdoms, it must still be acknowledged that the Christians, in the course of their intestine dis-

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[40] Ibid., p. 82.
[41] Ibid., p. 106.

> sensions, have inflicted far greater severities on each other than they had experienced from the zeal of the infidels.[42]

One wonders if Gibbon's mind was all that reluctant to receive this truth.

We might now ask more precisely why, according to Gibbon, the rise of Christianity and the decline of Rome paralleled. Why did he believe that an inseparable connection existed between the decline of the Empire and the growth and triumph of the church? In what ways was the church responsible? The first answer which Gibbon gives is that with all the other decaying forces in the Empire, the strength of the Christian world view simply undermined all the values which had made Rome great and strong. Roman religion collapsed, men profaned their intellects by believing in miracles and immortality and as a result the traditional Roman virtues disintegrated. Secondly, the Christian church and its administrative work robbed Rome of its leadership. "Armies" of men became monks and others isolated themselves from the mainstream of Roman culture, refusing to participate in the government and military service. Thirdly and finally, Christianity created dissension throughout the Empire, throwing province against province and class against class through controversies and persecutions which disgraced its devotees.[43] Gibbon writes:

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[42] *Ibid.*, p. 138.

[43] Shelby T. McCloy, *Gibbon's Antagonism to Christianity*, London, 1933, p. 15.

> From the Council of Nicea to the end of the seventh century, the peace and unity of the church was invaded by those spiritual wars; and so deeply did they affect the decline and fall of the empire that the historian has too often been compelled to attend the synods, to explore the creeds, and to enumerate the sects, of this busy period of ecclesiastical annals.[44]

Our purpose is not primarily to weigh the validity of his argument, though one must admit there is some cogency in what he contends, but to see how he views Christianity in light of his preunderstanding which is shaped by rationalistic presuppositions and reverence for the glory of Rome. Caught between these two features of Gibbon's preunderstanding, the Christianity which he describes comes out looking like the enemy of mankind. He has several specific axes to grind against Christianity in addition to the major one of its contributing to the fall of Rome. We will list just a few of them in order to catch the tone of Gibbon's attitude. He is against:

1. Enthusiasm, which expressed itself in intolerance of all other religions as well as for other Christians who maintained a different doctrinal position;[45]

2. The priests and monks who are fanatical and superstitious;[46]

3. The church, which is the enemy of reason;[47]

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44 Decline and Fall, Vol. VI, p. 115.
45 Ibid., Vol. II, p. 3.
46 Ibid., p. 339.
47 Autobiography, p. 151.

4. The early Christian martyrs whose numbers and spirit have been falsified;[48]

5. Miracles, whose authenticity cannot be accepted;[49]

6. Belief in immortality which is the result of "the influence of an established priesthood, which employed the motives of virtue and the instrument of ambition;"[50]

7. Christian theology which is a syncretism of Jewish thought and other obscure faiths and which leads men into intellectual bondage.[51]

He does have some respect for:

8. Jesus because he "lived and died for the service of mankind."[52] Yet he is in no way superior to Socrates.

In conclusion it would not be inaccurate or too strongly worded to state that toward religion in general he is skeptical, and toward Christianity in particular he is both hostile and prejudiced. He regards the Christian church as a disastrous episode in the history of mankind. G.M. Young describes Gibbon as

> before all things a humanist, and to a humanist any religion with an apparatus of sacred books and beliefs deduced from them, with an organized hierarchy diverting wealth from productive expenditures, and theological schools seducing intellect from more fruitful exercise, must appear, except so far as it satisfies certain irrational impulses which culture has not eradicated, a mischievous folly.[53]

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48 Decline and Fall, Vol. II, p. 114.
49 Ibid., p. 32.
50 Ibid., p. 23.
51 Ibid., p. 326.
52 Ibid., Vol. V, p. 105.
53 Op. cit., p. 95.

IV. Concluding Observations

As historical writing in the eighteenth century, Gibbon's work, considered in the whole, is without equal. In both style and content he outdistances his nearest competitors. Of particular value in terms of our study is his attempt to bring Christianity within the framework of historical causation and to correct misconceptions, half pious and half conventional, which had gathered around the history of the early church. This attempt in itself is an admirable endeavor and a necessary advance. Also his conscientious concern for detail, his intuitive grasp of evaluating sources and his awareness of continuity in history reflect his natural genius as an historian.

Yet Gibbon had his weaknesses as a historian. He really advances little farther than his contemporaries in understanding historical causation. He altogether ignores economic factors, and not infrequently falls back upon accident as a means of explanation. In addition, Gibbon's critical method of evaluating other research rarely goes beyond the elementary device of sorting his authorities into primary and secondary, well-informed and ill-informed and then striking a balance which satisfied his personal sense of probability. Where his results are accurate--and they often are--it is more the triumph of genius than method. Still another weakness is his historical scheme of golden age and corruption, a scheme to which he is not rigidly bound,

but which clouds his judgments about the excesses of both periods. Perhaps it should also be noted that The Decline and Fall lacks proportion, giving far more emphasis to the Roman period than the Byzantine.

But of crucial importance for us is how his preunderstanding influenced his view of the Christian religion. His purpose, to trace the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, suggested the direction which his interpretation was to take. Christianity, for Gibbon, is a major factor in the collapse of the empire. This impulse is given content and definition by his ideological and attitudinal presuppositions. As a rationalist, he treats certain Christian tenets and claims as superstition. As an admirer of Rome, he laments the detrimental effect of Christianity on the empire. Hostile to religion, he makes the Christian religion appear to be the enemy of goodness, truth and justice. At times he is clearly closed-minded and unconsciously irrational in his hostility. Fair and objective at many points, even most points, Gibbon's unchecked preunderstanding allows him in his treatment of the Christian faith to degenerate from an able historian into a propagandist.

Chapter Eight

History and Idealism: Hegel

I. The Formation of Hegel's Preunderstanding

We are endeavoring in this section to understand the role of preunderstanding in historical interpretations of Christianity by selecting representative figures from various eras during the life of the church. We first focused our attention on Augustine's theology of history and discovered that he viewed his subject from within faith in the God of the biblical record whose providential activity in the affairs of men gave meaning to human history. But we noted also in Augustine an inadequate historical method with which to approach the evidence of such activity. In Edward Gibbon, perhaps the best representative historian of the Enlightenment, we observed the reverse. His rationalistic presuppositions precluded from the start the consideration of the possibility of God's revelatory intervention in the events surrounding the appearance of Christ, yet, in historical method, he was better able to see their true historical dimension. We move now to a third historical interpretation of the Christian faith to see if it can do justice to the need for an appropriate preunderstanding for the Christ-event without sacrificing the concern for the historical. We turn to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's Philosophy of History which appeared in lecture form toward the end of

Hegel's life and which was designed as his crowning philosophical work.[1] In order to gain an insight into the pre-understanding which guides this work, it is necessary to look briefly at his life and environment.

Hegel was born in Stuttgart in the state of Würtemberg in 1770 to a quiet middle class family. His father was a subordinate official in the department of finances for the state, and his mother contented herself with the tasks of the home and the education of her three children. Hegel was a more diligent than brilliant pupil in school but was always teachable and ready to acquire knowledge of any kind. He was patient and methodical in his habits and wrote full analyses of all the important books which he read, copying out long passages in his notebook. He was especially gripped by Attic culture and read Greek literature (e.g. the tragedies of Sophocles) and saw in Greek art the "vision of a realized harmony of existence."[2] In addition to his notebook of extracts he also kept a diary in which he recorded certain life values which were beginning to form. The values reflect the "enlightened" views of the era: he condemns the evils of intolerance, sees the necessity of thinking independently, denounces the superstitions of the vulgar, notices the similarities of the miracles of all ages and in-

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[1] Two relatively recent treatments of Hegel's thought, though not specifically concerned with his philosophy of history, are J. N. Findlay, Hegel: A Re-examination, London, 1958, & Walter Kaufmann, Hegel: Reinterpretation, Texts and Commentary, New York, 1965.

[2] Edward Caird, Hegel, London, 1886, p. 7.

nations and suggests that there is little difference between the purchase of heaven's favor by direct offerings to the gods and the modern substitute of the gifts to the church.[3]

At eighteen Hegel went to Tübingen to study. There theology had first place in the curriculum, though the course was divided into philosophy and theology sections, the former being two years and the latter three years. There he met Schelling and joined him in defending the ideas of the French Revolution, became friends with the poet Hölderlin with whom he studied Plato and Sophocles, and generally gave himself with vigor to the Romantic current in which all Europe was engulfed. The faculty at Tübingen seems to have left little impression on Hegel who utilized the time more in pursuing his own philosophical interests of modifying and transforming Kantian principles than in attending lectures. The only comment from his tutors when he graduated in 1793 was that he was a man of good character, able in theology and philology, but with little aptitude in philosophy (a point which his biographers gleefully record).

The next six years of Hegel's life (his chrysalis years) were spent tutoring, three in Berne and three in Frankfurt on the Main. During this period he attempted to piece together the various fragments of his background and knowledge into a philosophical system. The two main strands of his intellectual heritage were his exposure to Greek culture and

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3 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

the thought of the Enlightenment. These influences are in evidence in the various subjects on which he was working during this six year period. He was especially preoccupied with religious questions--the history and origin of Christianity, its connection with Greek and Jewish religion, the life of Christ and rational religion. Gradually his mind turned to ethics, political life and ultimately to the physical and natural sciences. In all of these areas he was concerned on one hand with man's freedom or self-determination and on the other with man's life in its natural and spiritual unity. The former was the great concern of the Enlightenment, and the latter he saw to be the central issue of Greek thought. Gradually his philosophical system began to take shape and within a few years would appear in printed form.

In 1799 Hegel's father died leaving him with sufficient funds to support himself. He settled in Jena in 1801 and became an instructor in the university. There he renewed his contact with Schelling with whom he collaborated in support of the latter's philosophical position. Both men were agreed that there was a unity above all differences which maintains itself through all differences and in reference to which all differences must be explained. Though both were willing to call this unifying force spiritual, they disagreed on its exact interpretation. After Schelling went to Würzberg in 1803, Hegel remained in Jena, and finally obtained a professorship in 1805. He was now ready to break

with Schelling whom he ridiculed when he gave his own views to the world in the Phenomenology of Mind which appeared in 1806.

After the battle of Jena in 1806, which was disastrous to the Germans, the university became disorganized. Hegel lost his professorship and was forced to support himself as best he could. He served for two years as editor of a newspaper and for six years as headmaster of a Gymnasium. He continued to write and, between 1812-1816, produced his most elaborate treatise, the Science of Logic. In 1816 he accepted a professorship at Heidelberg where he published a comprehensive statement of his system, the Encyclopedia. In 1818 he was called to Berlin to the chair of philosophy vacated by Fichte. While at Berlin he published his Philosophy of Right and delivered several extended series of lectures, published posthumously, in which he applied his method to the interpretation of history, the fine arts and religion. By the time Hegel came to Berlin he had achieved the leadership of philosophical thought in Germany, a position which he held as indisputably as Goethe in the world of literature and Beethoven in the realm of music. Hegel died in a cholera epidemic in 1831.

This brief biographical sketch gives us some indication of the factors that went into forming Hegel's preunderstanding and which in turn helped to shape his historical interpretation of the Christian faith. Among the important influences on

Hegel was his diligent study of Greek thought and culture. One of Hegel's expositors, R. Mackintosh, describes Plato and Aristotle as his "remote antecedents".[4] It was Plato who attempted to give rational order to all the world around him. Things, according to Plato, are nothing in themselves if they do not embody thoughts or ideas. The only way to escape from error to truth, from non-being to reality, was to grasp the idea behind the phenomenon. Aristotle, on the other hand, conceived of reality as matter becoming real by acquiring or passing into form. This "evolutionary" type of philosophy finds the real in the process of things. If one adds Aristotle's conception of movement to Plato's concept of ideas as constituting reality, one discovers something very similar to Hegel's logic. It is for this reason that Reinhold Niebuhr describes Hegel's thought as reinterpreting "Platonism to conform to the historical consciousness of modernity."[5]

Another element in the formation of Hegel's preunderstanding is Christian theology. Hegel regarded his attempt at universal history as a rationalized version of the biblical idea of historical unity through divine providence.[6] Hegel writes that his "mode of treating the subject is a theodicy, a justification of the ways of God to man...so that the ills which may be found in the world may be comprehended and the

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[4] Hegel and Hegelianism, Edinburgh, 1903, p. 33.
[5] Faith and History, p. 3.
[6] Ibid., p. 122.

thinking spirit reconciled with the fact of the existence of evil."[7] Hegel saw himself as a true son of the faith and indeed as an apologist for it.

Still another ingredient which contributed to the development of Hegel's preunderstanding is the thought of the Enlightenment, including the rationalism of Descartes and Spinoza. To the Enlightenment Hegel owes his self-confidence in the all sufficiency of reason.[8] He never doubted that the "real was the rational" and "the rational the real", and that his own mind was rational. With such a doctrine, man has implicit knowledge of everything, and Hegel believed, without arrogance, that he had come a long way in making explicit what was implicit. Even God, as his critics are fond of saying, was not permitted by Hegel to have any secrets. But Hegel's rationalism was not a simple transplant of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. His thought was also influenced by Romantic strains. It is significant that in the small town of Jena where Hegel lived for a number of years Goethe had been minister of education, Fichte had lectured, Novalis and Schiller had regularly visited and friendships had been established with Hölderlin and Schelling. Hegel could not have resisted the influence of such a constellation of men who passed through Jena.[9] Romanticism had

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[7] Lectures on the Philosophy of History, tr. by J. Sibree, London, 1890, p. 16.

[8] Karl Barth, From Rousseau to Ritschl, London, 1959, p. 275.

[9] Jacob Bronowski & Bruce Mazlich, The Western Intellectual Tradition, London, 1960, pp. 479-480.

expressed the confidence, like the Rationalism of the Enlightenment, that man had powers within his grasp which, if properly employed, would enable him to find truth and personal fulfillment as one who was essentially in harmony with God. But it revolted against the uniformity that Rationalism tended to impose on man. If man was essentially in harmony with God, could not this harmony lie within the realm of a person's own individuality, his desire to be unique, to be free, to create something in particular? Why should these inner surgings be repressed and sacrificed on the altar of reason?[10] Hegel hears this plea of Romanticism and makes room for individuality and creativity--for diversity. But he does so without sacrificing rational unity to a mere appeal for poetry, creative experience and to individual genius.[11]

In that our concern is primarily for Hegel's view of history, and particularly his historical interpretation of Christianity, we must also examine the historical writing which preceded his and weigh its influence on the formation of his preunderstanding. In chapter seven we discussed in outline form the development of historiography from the Augustinian influenced medieval period, through the Renaissance and new science eras up to the Enlightenment with its culmination in the historical writing of Edward Gibbon. Now it is necessary to outline the presuppositions in historical

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10 Fuller, op. cit., pp. 39-40.

11 Barth, From Rousseau to Ritschl, p. 276.

understanding in the intervening years between the Enlightenment and Hegel's writing and, as we do so, we will discover that much of what appears new and original in Hegel had already been said, but in a more fragmentary form.

Before genuine progress could be made in historiography beyond the Enlightenment, three fundamental shifts had to take place:[12] (1) The epistemological foundation of history had to be established, making history a legitimate form of knowledge; (2) The perspective of history had to be expanded by a more sympathetic study of those previous eras which the Enlightenment had written off as uncivilized and hence ignored; (3) The understanding of human nature as being universally the same in all ages and races had to be refuted.

The first of these conditions was met by the Italian, Vico, who chronologically belongs more to the age of rationalism, but whose development of the idea of history was far ahead of his time. As he set about formulating the principles of the historical method as Bacon had formulated those of the scientific, he found himself confronted by Cartesian philosophy with its tendency to devalue historical knowledge. What he objected to in Descartes' theory of knowledge was not mathematical knowledge but the implication that the only criterion of truth is the clear and distinct idea which precluded from the start the legitimacy of historical knowledge. According

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[12] Collingwood, op. cit., p. 82. Collingwood here suggests only the latter two.

to Vico, this Cartesian criterion does not prove an idea true, only that the holder of the idea thinks it is true because it appears self-evident to him. What is needed, he contends, is a different epistemological principle. He finds this principle in the doctrine that verum et factum convertuntur: that is, that the condition of being able to know anything completely is that the knower himself should have made it.[13] It follows from this principle that history which is a human product can be an object of human knowledge. And once it is established how historical knowledge is genuine knowledge, it is not difficult to work out a historical method which Vico proceeded to do. An important related point about Vico is the place which he assigns to man in historical processes. Man is a genuine creator in history. But he is also that which Providence makes use of in "benevolent cunning" in order to accomplish a spiritual purpose as history moves along its spiraling course.[14] This idea we will see repeated in Hegel.

The remaining two conditions were met in the writing of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). Herder, under the influence of Rousseau, viewed human history as a growing organism and thus could be sympathetic with past ages in that they were necessary steps of development. Hence he saw value in civilizations very different from his own. In his Ideen

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13 Ibid., p. 64.

14 G.B. Vico, The New Science, tr. by T.B. Bergin & M.H. Fisch, New York, 1961, pp. 75 ff.

zur Philosophie der Menschengeschichte, published in four volumes between 1784 and 1791, we find his description of the historical progress of mankind. Mankind, according to Herder, is an organism gradually developing higher organisms within itself. Each stage in the evolutionary process necessarily leads on to the next, culminating in man (humanity) who is an end in himself. Man's rational and moral life vindicates his existence. Herder also meets the second condition in his analysis of the various civilizations. As he studied them he believed he could observe that each race had its own characteristics and that human nature was diversified and variable.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) in his Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte weltbürgerlicher Absicht published in 1784 continued the development of historiography beyond the Enlightenment conception. Collingwood summarizes Kant's view in four categories: (1) Universal history is a feasible ideal, but demands the union of historical and philosophical thought; (2) The notion of universal history presupposes the progressive development of a plan coming into existence; (3) That which is coming into existence is human rationality; (4) The means by which this is taking place is human irrationality.[15]

In a lecture delivered in Jena in 1789 entitled "Was heisst und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte?" the poet Schiller followed Kant's analysis, but whereas Kant

[15] Ibid., p. 103.

placed the goal of history in the future, Schiller asserted that the aim of universal history was to show how the present came to be what it is.

Another follower of Kant was the philosopher Fichte who published his views of history in an essay entitled Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters in 1806. Fichte also viewed the present as being of prime importance to the historian. The historian's task is to uncover the unique character of his own age and discern the single concept which characterizes each age in the past. By such an analysis the historian will be able to discern the sequence of concepts which constitutes the logical structure of history. The inner dynamic or the unifying concept characteristic of each age is the dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The concept first appears in its pure and abstract form (thesis), then it generates its own opposite (antithesis) with the resulting synthesis, and so the process goes on through history. The fundamental concept uniting the total process of history, according to Fichte, is rational freedom which also dances to the triple beat of the dialectic. In stage one, the primitive society, freedom operates without opposition on blind instinct. In stage two, freedom limits itself by the creation of authoritarian rulers and laws. Finally in stage three, civil freedom, men govern themselves.[16]

In the thought of Schelling we discover one more important concept in this development of historical thought which began

[16] Ibid., pp. 106 ff.

with Herder. Schelling understood history as the process in which the absolute itself comes into full and complete existence and self-awareness as Spirit.

In Hegel we see the culmination of this historical movement. His interpretation of history owes something to each of the writers mentioned. He believes that Providence stands behind history, cunningly using men to accomplish spiritual ends (Vico). Moreover, Hegel's history is a universal history of mankind (Herder) whose plot is the development of freedom which is identical with moral reason (Kant) and culminates in the present (Schiller). In addition, history is the development of freedom by the dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis (Fichte) and a cosmic process by which the world comes to realize itself in self-consciousness as Spirit (Schelling).

Out of all these contributing elements--his exposure to Greek thought, rationalism, romanticism, and the new developments in historical thinking--Hegel constructs a massive philosophical system. This philosophical system becomes the ideological framework out of which he interprets the Christian faith. It is comprehensive in its scope and functions as the major influence on Hegel's view. It operates consistently, consciously and rationally throughout his interpretation. Because of its breadth, it is inclined to function as a closed system, and as such, has a negative affect on his analysis of Christianity. The ideological assumptions of Hegel's

philosophical system tend to overshadow the attitudinal and methodological aspects of his preunderstanding. We will therefore focus our attention on how these ideological assumptions express themselves in his historical interpretation.

II. Hegel's Philosophy of History

As we have suggested, Hegel's philosophy of history, and hence his interpretation of the Christian faith, is so intimately connected with his total philosophical system (and is the logical outgrowth of it) that it is necessary to look at some aspects of that system in order to appreciate its role as a preunderstanding. We are keenly aware as we do so of the complexity and universality of his philosophical system and of our inability to do justice to it in a few short paragraphs. And of course this is not our purpose. There are, however, some basic underlying concepts which function as presuppositions in his analysis of history and the place of Christianity in that analysis. We must have these well in mind as we attempt to weave our way through the labyrinth of his views.

Perhaps the most basic concept, and here Hegel agrees with Fichte and Schelling, is that ultimate reality is absolute mind or Spirit (Geist) which passes through various stages of development in time and becomes conscious of itself in human reason. It is the self-expression of absolute mind which gives meaning and unity to all reality and hence to history.[17]

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[17] Findlay, op. cit., pp. 34 ff.

A second concept central to Hegel's thought is the notion of relation. For Hegel, every idea is a group of relations; we can think of something only by relating it to something else, and perceiving its similarities and differences. An idea without relations of any kind is empty and meaningless. By means of his dialectical logic, Hegel attempts to show how everything is connected in principle with everything else and helps to constitute the whole. Another way to state this essential element in Hegel's system is by the concept of implication. Each phase of reality is shown by Hegel to imply all the rest. There is a mutual interdependence of all that exists, a relation of the whole to the parts and of any part to the whole.[18]

Of all the relations, and this is a third fundamental concept, the most universal is that of contrast or opposition. Hegel makes use of Spinoza's dictum that "all determination is negation". Every condition of thought or of things leads of necessity to its opposite and then unites (Aufgehoben) with it to form a higher and more complex whole. With Schelling, Hegel posits the underlying identity of all opposites and with Fichte he argues that the inner logic of this identity is the dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

Fourthly and finally, Hegel sees mind as the indispensable

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[18] Ibid., pp. 58 ff.

organ for the perception of ultimate reality. It is mind which discovers the unity in diversity of all thought and being.

Hegel's Philosophy of History incorporates all of these basic concepts. He does so by dividing his lectures into three main sections each of which has subsections. In Section One, the Introduction, Hegel sets forth his pivotal themes, methodology and approach. In Section Two he analyzes the geographical basis of history and divides the globe accordingly. In his final section Hegel traces the development of human history through its four important stages: the Oriental, the Greek, the Roman and the Germanic. We will follow Hegel's pattern in our discussion. This will enable us to see the specific place he assigns to Christianity within the whole.

Hegel begins by defining his effort as philosophical history, in distinction from original or reflective history, which has as its goal the apprehension of the reasons why events happened as they did. The reasons behind the events are discovered by Reason. As he says, "The only thought which philosophy brings with it to the contemplation of history is the simple conception of Reason; that Reason is the sovereign of the world; that the history of the world, therefore, presents us with a rational process."[19] The nature of the reasons discovered by Reason belong to the realm

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[19] Op. cit., p. 9.

of Spirit. History is the gradual development of the self-consciousness of the eternal Spirit or God. For Hegel, Infinite or Pure Being is its own negation or Nothing. To be real, the Infinite must be concrete, and therefore manifests itself in the myriad forms of the existing world with the goal of returning to itself as the One Real Individual, the Absolute Idea. In this dialectical process the goal is realized in and constitutes the substance of history.[20] The essence of the Spirit's self-manifestation is freedom. Hence "the History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom...."[21]

What are the various means which the principle of freedom (used synonomously by Hegel with the progressive self-consciousness of the Spirit) employs for its realization? Hegel mentions three in particular. The first is his famous "cunning of reason" (<u>List der Vernunft</u>).[22] In order to be free the absolute Spirit avails itself of the passions, appetites, private interests and opinions of individuals and peoples to secure its own end. "The cunning of reason...sets the passions to work for itself."[23] Reason works in and behind the passions and selfish interests of man and uses them as agents. Hence it is not by chance, but of the very essence of history, that the ultimate outcome of great

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20 Grace Cairns, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., p. 282.
21 Hegel, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., pp. 19-20.
22 See Löwith, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., pp. 52-59, for an essay on this concept.
23 Hegel, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., p. 34.

historical actions is always something which was not intended by men.

The second means utilized by the Spirit or God to achieve self-conscious freedom is great men called by Hegel "world historical individuals".[24] Individuals such as Caesar or Napoleon had no consciousness of the general idea which they were unfolding while seeking their own political ends, yet they were thinking men who had insights into the requirements of their time and ushered in the necessary changes for progress. In the accomplishment of their goals, though they may have trampled innocent flowers along the way, they were the agents of the World-Spirit and an indispensable part of its progressive self-awareness. This emphasis on the part played by great men in history may have been partly stimulated by Hegel's personal obervation of Napoleon who marched with his victorious army through Jena in 1806. Hegel recorded in his diary that he "saw the Emperor, the world-soul, riding through the city to reconnoitre. It is in truth a strange feeling to see such an individual before me, who here, from one point, as he rides on his horse, is reaching over the world, and remoulding it."[25]

A third means used by the Spirit for its ends is the state. For Hegel, the state was the highest expression of human reason; in fact the state _was_ reason and therefore could do no wrong.[26] The essence of the state was freedom,

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24 _Ibid_., p. 30.
25 Quoted by Caird, _op_. _cit_., p. 66.
26 J.W. Thompson, _op_. _cit_., p. 205.

freedom manifested and organized. The succession of the various states in history is the pathway of the Spirit's gradual self-realization. Hence for Hegel there is no history prior to the state, only inchoate barbarism and decay.

In the next major section Hegel discusses the geographical basis of history. What is important to notice in this section is his refusal to approach history by way of nature.[27] Nature and history are essentially two different things. They intersect only at the point of geography, and here Hegel is careful to strike a balance in describing this mutual dependence. He writes: "Die Natur darf nicht zu hoch und nicht zu niedrig angeschlegen werden."[28] A few examples from this section will illustrate Hegel's point. The extremes of heat and cold may exert a power which prevents the self-development of Spirit. The temperate zone is the theater of history. Australia and the Pacific Islands are physically immature. America is but the echo of the Old World, and Africa displays its bondage to the powers of nature. Only Asia and Europe are historical. In addition, nature provides the symbol for the development of world history. As the sun rises in the East and travels to the West, so goes the course of civilization.

So it is, in his third section, that he traces the

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[27] Collingwood, op. cit., p. 114.

[28] Quoted by Robert Flint, The Philosophy of History in Europe, Edinburgh, 1874, p. 514.

Spirit's progress across the cultures of Asia, Greece, Rome and the Germanic world. "The history of the world travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning."[29] In the East to West movement the Spirit has been educated to the reality and consciousness of its freedom and is "coming home" after the alienation with itself.

Asian history (China, India and Persia) represents the childhood of the Spirit's development toward consciousness of its freedom. In China the society was organized in a way which excluded individual reflection and creativity in every sphere of life. There was no scientific research, art, service or initiative, no real morality of the heart and conscience and no sense of spiritual life. All human freedom was absorbed into the emperor. He is that One who owns all things. Therefore, "no other individual has a separate existence."[30] India too suffered with no freedom or inward morality. In Persia the Spirit first begins to waken from its slumber and is recognized as light.

But the veil is lifted to the freshness and fulness of youthful life by the Greek Apollo who exhorts, "Man, know thyself." In Greece man first felt himself as truly man. Here the Spirit emancipated itself and attained free individuality. Socrates, in particular, represents for Hegel the

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29 Hegel, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 109.

30 <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 105.

beginning of the realization of reflective inwardness. But only some are free; slavery still exists and morality has not yet become fully self-conscious because "the individual will of the subject adopts unreflectingly the conduct and habits prescribed by justice and the laws."[31]

Stage three, the Roman world, represents the manhood of Spirit, a time of obedience to the positive law of the state. In Rome the individual sacrifices himself for the national interest, yet without loss of personality. But gradually as the individual despot takes over the state and is accepted because of the need for order, the Spirit cannot accept this tyranny and is driven back into the depths of its own inner being to seek a spiritual empire. Such an empire is revealed and founded by Christ.

With the decline of Rome and under the inspiration of Christianity the Germanic world developed. It represents the old age of Spirit, not in the sense of weakness, but in maturity, strength and the fulfillment of time. In the Germanic world there is the recognition that all men are free. In modern Germany the antithesis between church and state which existed in the Middle Ages has vanished and the spiritual becomes reconnected with the secular. "Freedom has found the means of realizing its Ideal--its true existence."[32]

It is in this general framework that Hegel gives us

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31 Ibid., p. 106.

32 Ibid., p. 116.

his historical interpretation of Christianity. The Christian religion made its appearance at a time when the Roman world was in a "desperate condition and the pain of abandonment by God--came to an open rupture with reality, and made prominent the general desire for satisfaction such as can only be attained in 'the inner man,' the Soul,--thus preparing the ground for a higher spiritual world."[33] The situation of mankind was therefore "analogous to a place of birth, and its pain was like the travail-throes of another and higher spirit, which manifested itself in connection with the Christian Religion."[34] With the dawn of Christianity, Spirit is self-harmonized and man, recognizing God as Spirit, finds his own essential being. God, conceived of as Spirit, is the new principle on which the history of the world turns.

It is Jesus who recognized the nature of God as pure Spirit and therefore he becomes the supreme organizing force of the modern world. Though he was clothed in the historical appearances of finitude his true substance, i.e. his essential nature, was absolute and perfect spirituality which is true infinitude. In him time was fulfilled; he is the goal of all previous history and the starting point for all history to come because he saw the principle that God and man are one by virtue of their sharing a spiritual nature.[35]

A great mistake is made, Hegel believes, when Christ is

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[33] Ibid., p. 330.

[34] Ibid.

[35] George S. Morris, Hegel's Philosophy of the State and History, Chicago, 1887, p. 227.

regarded as only a bygone personality. If one takes this "unspiritual" point of view, then it leads to such irrelevant questions as his birth, his father and mother, his early domestic relations and his miracles. Considered in respect to his talents, character and morality he can only be placed in the same category as Socrates and other great men. "But", says Hegel, "if Christ is to be looked upon only as an excellent, even impeccable individual, and nothing more, the conception of the Speculative Idea, of Absolute Truth is ignored...."[36] The real issue concerning Christ is not his person but the revelation which was made in him. All that has been made of Christ in the doctrines and councils of the church is the symbolic expression in pictorial language of what philosophy can state more accurately. It is not the uniqueness of the historical Christ or the once-for-all character of his mediation which is important, but the ultimate truth that Divinity and humanity are one in essence, that the life of man is the life of God in temporal form.[37] In the grand progressive spiral of history, individual events are but transient individualizations of an eternal and unchanging content. The importance of Jesus, as a World-Historical figure, is that he says for the first time that God and man are one and attained in his death freedom and infinity of spirit. All men now are to appropriate this idea and to accomplish Jesus' own history.

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[36] *Op. cit.*, p. 337.

[37] H. R. Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

Thus in Christ a new epoch is launched. Man is liberated in principle from foreign authority and is able to achieve authentic selfhood in relation to the absolute. With Christ, time is fulfilled and the historical world becomes, in principle, perfect. But at the beginning of the epoch, the principle which Christ enunciated is still abstract and acknowledged only in the inner shrine of the heart. It has not yet penetrated into secular existence. The idea, because it too is a part of history, must go through the dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The Spirit of Christ which embodied the early church faced the antithetical challenge of the barbarism that swept over the Roman Empire and resulted in the synthesis of the Roman church. With the rise of the church, a new antithesis takes shape in the secular state which renders its allegiance to Rome not by freedom but by compulsion. As the battle rages between the secular states and the ecclesiastical church, the essential unity of the divine and human is violated and the Spirit is no longer able to find its expression in the ecclesiastical church. The synthesis which arises is the modern German world. In this new expression the Spirit becomes conscious of its freedom, and the antithesis of Church and state begins to vanish. Man begins to realize that the spiritual can only be realized through the secular and that the secular must be developed out of the spiritual. The church becomes an integral part of the state. The states and laws are merely

the manifestation of religion in the relations of the actual world. The truth which has been proclaimed must now be converted into fact, and it is this task which the various nations of Europe have before them and which each of them is accomplishing with more or less success in its own way.

Thus, as the realization of the Spirit of Christianity, the history of the world is a true theodicy. Speaking philosophically, history is the self-realization of absolute Spirit, "whose reality is the consciousness of Freedom and nothing short of it."[38] But speaking theologically, history is God's justification and the assurance "that what has happened, and is happening everyday, is not only not 'without God,' but is essentially His work."[39]

III. Evaluation

We began our discussion of Hegel wondering if his analysis of the Christian religion would meet the two conditions which we have established as necessary in order for any historical interpretation to do justice to Christian faith, namely an appropriate preunderstanding (faith) and an adequate historical methodology. At first glance it might appear that Hegel has met these requirements, but on closer scrutiny it becomes questionable whether he has really met either one.

But let us first look at the reasons for affirming that

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[38] Hegel, op. cit., p. 477.
[39] Ibid.

he has met these two conditions, i.e. at the positive contribution which he makes to our historical understanding of the Christian faith. It should be acknowledged from the beginning that his intention has been both to write from within faith and to play fair with historical fact. If we are merely to judge intention, then credit must be given to Hegel for meeting the conditions. He does see God as the author of the historical drama of mankind. God governs the world, and history is the carrying out of His plan.[40] We also learn from Hegel that our knowledge of God is historical, particular and event-oriented. What happens in history is the revelation of God. And of course, as these two concepts are brought together, they imply others as well. It follows that history is a meaningful and rational process, that God and reason are not in conflict, but one, and that Christian faith so interpreted is not repugnant to modern culture. All this is to Hegel's credit. Just where then does he fail? Why has not his massive system won our day as it did his? There are fundamental reasons, and we might summarize them as a failing to do justice to the two requirements which have been laid down as necessary features for an adequate interpretation of the Christian faith.

In the first place, Hegel does not have an adequate historical methodology. He makes no serious scientific inquiry into the evidence. At certain points he is ignorant of historical facts; at other times he either ignores them or twists

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[40] Ibid., p. 38.

them to suit his purpose. He forces onto history an unreal unity by either ignoring or falsifying historical details.[41] In addition, as Croce has observed,[42] Hegel often confuses opposition and distinction. History is not necessarily a dialectical process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Historical institutions may originate and develop side by side, but not be or only partly be in conflict. It is artificial to force dialectical logic onto history. Hegel also fails as a historian in limiting history to political history. He does so because of his understanding of absolute Spirit and its relation to the state, but this is certainly not sufficient grounds for ignoring a multitude of other human activities which constitute the stuff of history just as much as political activity. We cannot resist mentioning one final negative point, which it seems, all who discuss Hegel are fond of mentioning, namely that he sees history as being fulfilled in the Prussian state of his time. This sanctification of the secular state, a sort of secular realized eschatology,[43] assigns virtue at precisely the point where it is most dubious, that is in the corporate will. The irony of such an "easy conscience" which deifies the state is that it makes possible the unleashing of the whole daemonic fury of the collective expression of man.[44] In short, Hegel fails in historical methodology because he makes it a slave of his system, a system which is a monument to his creative ability and imagination but a tombstone for scientific historiography.

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41 R. Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 122.

42 Benedetto Croce, What is Living and What is Dead in the Philosophy of Hegel, tr. by Douglas Ainslie, London, 1915, passim.

43 See Bultmann, History and Eschatology, p. 68.

44 See R. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I, pp. 80, 93, 118.

Secondly, Hegel comes to the historical dimension of Christianity with an inadequate preunderstanding. It is not essentially that of faith but of idealistic philosophy. Even when it is acknowledged, as we have done, that there is no such thing as "pure faith", i.e. faith which functions independently of cultural and historical influences, it is still difficult to call Hegel's philosophical system, which we have described as one massive complex preunderstanding, the expression of faith. It really has very little to do with what the church has traditionally recognized as faith. As a result fundamental tenets of Christian belief are distorted. Christianity is forced to fit his philosophical system and becomes nearly unrecognizable in the process. The fundamental idea of God, for example, is that of an impersonal and abstract being. He is not the God of the Bible, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but the God of the philosophers. He is Absolute Spirit, Idea, Reason, It. He does not stand sovereignly above history, but is himself, in his self-manifestation, the process of history. Moreover, evil is not something for which atonement must be made but an essential part of the whole dialectical process of history. As Barth remarks: "Hegel could even speak of the Devil in tones of unfeigned admiration."[45] Further, the Christian faith is conceived of by Hegel as being realized in the secular state, as if the Christian faith could

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45 From Rousseau to Ritschl, p. 286.

ever be "realized" in the secular state, let alone anywhere else.[46] And finally, in the last resort, Jesus himself is irrelevant; a bearer of an important idea, yes, but not the Word made flesh nor the unique once-for-all redeemer of mankind.[47]

For these reasons we must look beyond Hegel for an adequate historical interpretation of the Christian faith.

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46 Löwith, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

47 H. R. Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

Chapter Nine

History and Nineteenth Century Liberalism

Adolph von Harnack

I. Harnack's Frame of Reference

In our attempt to ascertain the influence of preunderstanding on representative historical interpretations of Christian faith we have considered three quite different approaches. In Augustine we found a theologian at work, writing from within faith, attempting to organize the particularities of history into a theological framework. In Edward Gibbon we observed the historian whose understanding of Christianity was largely determined by his rationalistic presuppositions and by his placing of the Christian faith within the larger context of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. In Hegel we saw the philosopher whose metaphysical system gave form to the historical dimension of the Christian religion. In our analysis we have argued that all three men failed at certain points to do full justice to the demands placed upon any interpreter who would seek to render an account of the Christian faith. Augustine, because the historical method was as yet undeveloped, was unable to deal competently with the historical questions surrounding the appearance of Christ. Gibbon, who saw more clearly than Augustine the historical issues, was prohibited from treating them adequately by his uncritical acceptance of the Enlightenment

world view. Hegel, due to his preoccupation with creating an all-embracing view of the unity of history, was unable to give proper attention to the importance of historical details and particular events.

We turn now to Adolph von Harnack who, like Gibbon, was a professional historian and one incidently whose quality of workmanship was second to that of no German historian of his day. But unlike Gibbon, Harnack was also a Christian theologian who understood and interpreted Christianity from within faith. Faith is the broad horizon of understanding out of which he works. However the specific form that his faith takes is related to his life situation and the predominant thought patterns of his culture, both of which we must examine if we are to appreciate the role which his preunderstanding assumes in his historical interpretation of the Christian faith.

Harnack was born in Dorpat on the Baltic in 1851 to a reasonably well-to-do and cultured bourgeois family.[1] He was educated at the local university and displayed both diligence and brilliance. His own ability, and the fact that his brother-in-law, Hans Debrück, was the imperial tutor and adviser, brought him into contact with two of the great

[1] For a full account of Harnack's life, see Agnes von Zahn-Harnack, Adolph von Harnack, Berlin, 1936. See also E. Schmidt and E. Seeberg, "Adolph von Harnack" in Sammlung gemeinverständlicher Vorträge und Schriften aus dem Gebiet der Theologie und Religiongeschichte, Heft 150 (1930) and F.B. Clogg, "Adolph von Harnack", London Quarterly Review, CLIV, 241-246. For a careful treatment of his theological views, see Wilhelm Pauck, Harnack and Troeltsch, New York, 1968.

historical minds of his time, Mommsen (whose daughter he later married) and Dilthey.

He began his academic career as a Lecturer in church history at Leipzig (1874) and soon established a national reputation by his sound textual work in a collection of writings by the early Christian fathers. From Leipzig Harnack moved on to Giessen (1879), then to Marburg (1886) and finally to Berlin (1888). By the outbreak of the First World War he was one of the most famous scholars in Germany. He wrote voluminously and with uniform quality, publishing over 1800 titles of books and articles. His best known works are _The History of Dogma_ (1886 ff.), _What is Christianity?_ (1901) and perhaps his greatest work, _The Expansion of Christianity_ (1902).

In addition to his scholarly work, Harnack took an active part in public affairs and was especially influential in the educational policy of the nation. Active in the Berlin Academy of Science, he prepared its official history in 1900. From 1905-1921 he was the general director of the Preussiche Staatsbibliothek at Berlin. From 1910 he was president of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaften which was founded at his suggestion on the centenary of Berlin University. In the post-war republic he was a rallying point for German scholarship and aided the revival of research and publication.[2] What is important to notice about the

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2 For a brief account of his activities see J.W. Thompson, _op. cit._, pp. 566-568. See also Felix E. Hirsch, "The Scholar as Librarian: To the Memory of Adolph von Harnack", _The Library Quarterly_, IX (1939), 299-320.

course of Harnack's life is his thorough identification with and acceptance of nineteenth century liberal culture.

But in order to better understand the factors which went into the formation of Harnack's preunderstanding it is necessary to go beyond this simple biographical sketch and to examine the intellectual currents of the age in which he lived and worked. The nineteenth century was an age of great intellectual ferment, and a man as sensitive to his time as Harnack could not help but be influenced by the dominant thought patterns of his era. Because Harnack was both a theologian and a historian, it is in the development of theology and historiography that we find the main influences which shaped his preunderstanding.

What is of lasting importance in nineteenth century theology is not so much the final conclusions which were established but rather the development of a new theological method.[3] This new theological method in large measure grew out of the fundamental changes which were taking place in historical thinking. Confronted with the rise of new historical knowledge, the theologian found it increasingly difficult to employ the traditional method of systematizing inerrant propositional statements from Scripture. This sharpened sense of historical consciousness took many forms, one of which was the development of biblical criticism. The "lower" critics turned their attention to the individual

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3 Richardson, History Sacred and Profane, p. 78.

problems of the text and weighed the merits of each of the manuscripts. The "higher" critic was interested in the accuracy of the text and the meaning of the words. His task was to get behind the text to the events as they really happened. In order to do so it was necessary for him to find out when each passage of Scripture was written, who wrote it and to whom and why it was written.[4]

One of the important theological movements growing out of higher criticism was the search for the historical Jesus.[5] Such a search implied that Jesus, as he lived in history, was different from the Jesus whom we find pictured in the Gospels. The effort of the historical critic to get behind the Gospel accounts to find out what Jesus had really been like was built on the assumption that the early church and the Gospel writers had added their own interpretation to the actual events. The problem left to the critic was to sift the authentic sayings and doings of Jesus from the later additions. Karl Barth lists five features of this movement which he believes unite the many divergent attempts to reconstruct the historical Jesus: (1) The authors of the movement believed they could understand Christ in the same way as they did other historical persons; (2) They could understand him as a person of a distant bygone time insofar as they have sources of his life, i.e. the Gospels; (3) They sought the

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4 See George E. Ladd, op. cit., for an excellent survey.
5 See above, ch. 5.

historical Jesus who can be distinguished from the sources, i.e. the true historical core which becomes visible behind the sources; (4) They believed that Jesus was a human personage who is in principle accessible to historical knowledge in exactly the way as Tiberius was accessible to them; (5) As a personage who is comprehensible historically they believed that Jesus was of supreme value.[6]

Perhaps the most important single theologian of the nineteenth century was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834).[7] His work is important for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the formulation of this new theological method. It had two foundational postulates.[8] The first was the affirmation that Christianity was a positive historical religion. In this affirmation Schleiermacher parts company with both the prevailing rationalism of the eighteenth century which sought the universal religion of reason and Hegel's idealism which posited the metaphysic of the Absolute Spirit. Christianity, according to Schleiermacher, is a particular religion which began at a certain moment of history, developed as a historical movement and consists today in a particular form. The second postulate of Schleiermacher's theological method was the concept of the religious consciousness. Schleiermacher maintained that dogmas were a secondary and

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6 From Rousseau to Ritschl, p. 378.

7 See ch. 2 for an account of his views on hermeneutics and ch. 3 on revelation.

8 Richardson, The Bible in the Age of Science, pp. 81-82.

derivative element in religion. What is essential is the revelation of the Infinite within the sanctuary of the individual soul. Responsive to the Romanticism of his time, he insisted that the heart of religion was feeling, and in particular the feeling of absolute dependence upon God. The uniqueness of Jesus is not to be found in some metaphysical doctrine about his person nor in a miraculous account of his birth, but in the fact that he possessed a God-consciousness to a supreme degree. Within these two principles much of Liberal theology of the nineteenth century found its perimeters. The framework allowed sufficient foom for the developing science of biblical criticism and its various products (e.g. the search for the historical Jesus) because it did not restrict free inquiry with a priori dogmatic propositions.

The theology of Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) rested easily within the two postulates of Schleiermacher's theological method and represents the most significant development of the method in the latter half of the nineteenth century.[9] For Ritschl, religion must be practical, not theoretical; it must begin with the questions of the here and now. Like Schleiermacher, he had little patience with metaphysics or with theological discussions which did not appear to have practical consequences. To be practical, Christianity must be built on fact. The ground of truth for Christianity was the one certain historical fact which could be empirically

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[9] H.R. Mackintosh, op. cit., pp. 136-174.

investigated, namely the impact which Jesus made upon the soul confronted by him. God, for Ritschl, was not to be found in nature, but in history where a movement has arisen dedicated to the values articulated by Jesus. Religion, then, is based on value judgments, and the importance of Jesus rests solely on the fact that he led men to find the God who stands behind the values. Jesus is divine in the sense that he makes us conscious of the highest in life. From his influence comes the church, the value-creating community, which is the spearhead of building a society inspired by love and dedicated to the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Harnack's theological position, while he brings to it his own originality, essentially combines the central features of nineteenth century theological thought. He is sensitive to the advance of biblical criticism and interested in getting behind the sources to the real Jesus of history. Christianity is a positive historical religion developing and adapting in response to its environment as any other historical institution. The essence of religion is the soul's relationship to God and its chief expression is the effort to realize the values enunciated by Jesus, namely the recognition of the Fatherhood of God and the establishment of the brotherhood of man. Thus in Harnack we see the final working out of the presuppositions of nineteenth century theology. These presuppositions constitute the main ideological assumptions in Harnack's pre-

understanding. They of course are a major influence on his interpretation and function consistently, consciously and rationally throughout it.

These ideological assumptions also suggest the attitudinal component of Harnack's preunderstanding. He is a Christian theologian operating from within faith and is therefore sympathetic in his treatment of the Christian revelation. But this attitude of sympathetic rapport does not mean that Harnack sets aside that complex of attitudes which are essential to the historian, i.e. fairness, objectivity, honesty, thoroughness, open-mindedness, etc. Both sets of attitudes, that of the theologian and that of the historian, are operative in his interpretation.

The methodological strand of Harnack's preunderstanding can be traced to the increasingly sophisticated science of historiography. It is in this area that we discover the sources of his methodological presuppositions. The new history which began to be written in the nineteenth century, especially in Germany, was no longer content with mere erudition but attempted to discover the significance and continuity of events, i.e. to perceive and to understand the development of history.[10] Gradually, as the study of history progressed, the emphases of the Romantic movement gave way to the rigorous treatment of data. With the decline of Hegel's influence

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10 J.W. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

there was a general suspicion of all philosophies of history and a tendency toward positivism, i.e. the effort to analyze historical data in a way similar to that employed by the natural sciences. This involved the historian in the two-fold task of ascertaining facts and then framing laws by generalizing from the facts (induction).[11] The nineteenth century historians pursued the job of collecting facts with vigor and skill. There was a vast increase of detailed historical information based on an accurate and critical examination of evidence. In fact the best historian became the greatest master of detail. The ideal of constructing a universal history was replaced by concentration on a much narrower area.

In the endeavor to ascertain the facts, the historians worked out a new method of handling sources which centered in philological criticism. Each source was divided into its component parts by distinguishing its earlier and later elements, thus enabling the historian to discriminate between the more and less trustworthy portions. Even the more trustworthy portions were then analyzed, attempting to show how the author's point of view influenced his statement of the facts and allowing the historian to rectify any distortions.[12]

In most cases the historian never got to the second stage of positivist principles, yet continued to be influenced

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[11] Collingwood, op. cit., pp. 126-127.
[12] Ibid., p. 130.

by the first stage. He regarded each historical fact as something capable of being isolated by the processes of research. This resulted in the total field of history being sliced up into an infinite number of parts, each capable of being separately considered. In addition, each fact was considered to be knowable in an objectively empirical way. Thus the so-called subjective elements of the historian's preunderstanding could be eliminated. The ideal of the historian was to ascertain the facts in cool detachment, and say what they were without passing judgment on them. As a result, history became largely the history of external events, not the history of thought out of which the events grew.[13]

The great Renaissance of German historical scholarship, of which Harnack was a product, began with the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810. To this intellectual center came a whole succession of learned historians and finally Harnack himself in 1888. One of the early leaders of the German historiography was Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776-1831) whose lectures on Roman history drew large crowds of students and townspeople. Niebuhr reconstructed Roman history on a "positive" factual basis, cutting away all the excesses of superstition and legend. He was especially critical of Livy, whose accounts he described as so much

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[13] Ibid., p. 132. Collingwood here, with his idealist understanding of history, wishes to make a stronger point than I do.

patriotic fiction. The real force behind the progress of the study of history in Germany was Leopold Ranke (1795-1885) who came to Berlin in 1825. At twenty-nine he had written and published his Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker which contained the famous description of history, "wie es eigentlich gewesen ist." This work attempted to show the essential unity of the Romano-Germanic world and contained a penetrating criticism of historical sources. It immediately established Ranke's reputation and secured for him the leadership of German historical thought. It was not long before a whole school grew up around him, with over thirty of his students achieving a high reputation as historians and filling the important chairs of history in the various German universities.[14]

It was in this tradition of historiography that Harnack wrote his historical works. In many ways, as he did with the theology of the nineteenth century, he brings the historiography of the same time to a magnificent climax. His work as a scholar is above reproach, though not criticism, and he was indeed the peer of any of the great German historians of his time.[15] Harnack's chief concern was to establish, on the basis of a critical study of history, a reconciliation between Christianity and modern culture. His method was

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14 J.W. Thompson, op. cit., pp. 189-192.
15 Ibid., p. 567.

the same as that of the secular historian, to ascertain facts objectively and to employ a scientific methodology in their interpretation. His work is the embodiment of his own contention that church history and secular history are one.[16]

Thus nineteenth century bourgeois culture, the prevailing theological traditions of his time, the attitudes of both the theologian and the historian, and the presuppositions of positivist historiography supply the main ingredients in Harnack's preunderstanding. All of these elements converge on what might be described as Christian liberal humanism which becomes the construct out of which Harnack proceeds to the task of interpretation. Let us now see how this preunderstanding manifests itself in his historical interpretation of the Christian faith.

II. Harnack's Interpretation

Like his immediate theological predecessor, Albrecht Ritschl, Harnack stressed the ethical side of Christianity. He rejected all metaphysical formulations and reduced Christian doctrine to a bare minimum. He is thus a typical exponent of liberal Protestantism. For Harnack, as with Ritschl, religion is a practical affair concerned with the power to live a blessed and holy life. In Christianity this power stems from the historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ who lived and taught true religion. Among the motives which induced Harnack to reduce Christianity to this essential

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[16] Adolph von Harnack, "The Relation Between Ecclesiastical and General History", Contemporary Review, LXXXVI (1904), 846-59.

minimum was the desire to make Christian faith acceptable to bourgeois culture.[17] Harnack was convinced that all the trappings of organized religion stood in the way of the liberty of the Christian, a concept articulated by Luther and the Reformation. Harnack could see no need for mediation between God and man in the form of priests, Bible, church, sacraments or metaphysical christology. All this he perceived to be a stumbling block for modern man which had to be overcome. According to Harnack, the way to overcome the objection was to accept it as valid. Religion consists entirely on the soul's relation to God and the practice of the ethic of love and not in the external formalities concocted by church officials across the centuries. Hence Harnack advocated the need to jettison christology and ecclesiastical dogma and restore the historical Jesus and his religion to their rightful place, to once again look to that personality whose power and influence set the whole Christian enterprise in motion.

Although the original religion of Jesus was ethical and practical, it was not long before the church felt the need to make some beliefs about God and the world more explicit. This tendency to formulate religious beliefs led the church to articulate dogmas, i.e. propositions which were supposed to express the contents of the faith and the acknowledgement of which was necessary for church membership and its promised blessings. In 1886 Harnack began to publish in

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[17] See Thomas Nicol, "Harnack Among the Apologists", London Quarterly Review, CVII (1907), 23-29.

several volumes his In Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte which had for its subject this development of dogma. The theme of these volumes is the gradual perversion of the original gospel by the imposition of Hellenistic conceptions upon it. Dogma arose as an apologetic effort to place the Christian tradition within the framework of Greek philosophy. As a result, true religion was choked by theological and metaphysical doctrines, and the history of the church's thinking has for the most part been the story of the obscuration and deterioration of Christian truth rather than of its positive development. Harnack clarifies his purpose and scheme when he writes that

> The History of Dogma is a discipline of general Church History, which has for its object the dogmas of the Church. These dogmas are the doctrines of the Christian faith logically formulated and expressed for scientific and apologetic purposes, the contents of which are a knowledge of God, of the world, and of the provisions made by God for man's salvation. The Christian Churches teach them as truths revealed in Holy Scripture, the acknowledgment of which is the condition of the salvation which religion promises. But as the adherents of the Christian religion had not these dogmas from the beginning, so far, at least, as they form a connected system, the business of the history of dogma is, in the first place, to ascertain the origin of the Dogmas (of Dogma) and then secondly to describe their development (their variations).[18]

In pursuing this two-fold task, Harnack was dedicated to the historical positivists' ideal of objectivity and believed

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[18] History of Dogma, tr. by Neil Buchanan, New York, 1961, Vol. I, p. 1.

that his responsibility was "simply to recognize this state of things and to represent it exactly as it lies before us in the documents."[19] For Harnack, there was no room for an inquiry into the author's point of view. In a historical work such an inquiry need not be made, for what matters is "whether the author is in sympathy with the subject about which he writes, whether he can distinguish original elements from those that are derived, whether he has a thorough acquaintance with his material, whether he is conscious of the limits of historical knowledge and whether he is truthful."[20]

The perversion of the original gospel began in apostolic times when the early preachers began to preach about the significance of Christ's person rather than repeating his teaching and reporting the historical events of his life. This led to the emergence of a new stage in the history of the church, Dogmatic Christianity, which "stands between Christianity as the religion of the Gospel, presupposing a personal experience and dealing with disposition and conduct, and Christianity as a religion of cultus, sacraments, ceremonial and obedience, in short of superstition...."[21] The process was accentuated by the spread of Christianity into the Hellenistic world and its absorption of Greek ideas. Not the least influential in this development was the Apostle Paul who "dethroned the people and the religion of Israel" and

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19 Ibid., p. 3.
20 Ibid., p. vii.
21 Ibid., p. 16.

"tore the Gospel from its Jewish soil...."[22] Hence "dogma in its conception and development is a work of the Greek Spirit on the soil of Gospel" whereas "the Gospel itself is not dogma, for belief in the Gospel provides room for knowledge only so far as it is a state of feeling and course of action, that is, a definite form of life."[23]

Harnack views the original gospel as presenting itself "as an apocalyptic message on the soil of the Old Testament, and as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, and yet it is a new thing, the creation of a universal religion on the basis of that of the Old Testament."[24] Jesus himself brought no new doctrine, but simply lived a holy life with God and before God and gave himself to the service of mankind in order to win them for the Kingdom of God. As a result of his example and teaching, many Jews left the Jewish church to form a new community, and it was this community which was gradually changed by the intrusion of foreign elements. Harnack asks in lament

> how and by what influence was the living faith transformed into the creed to be believed, the surrender to Christ into a philosophical Christology, the Holy Church into the corpus permixtum, the glowing hope of the Kingdom of heaven into a doctrine of immortality and deification, prophecy into learned exegesis and theological science, the bearers of the Spirit into clerics, the brethren into laity held in tutelage, miracles and healing into nothing or into priestcraft

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22 Harnack, The Expansion of the Christian Church in the First Three Centuries, tr. and ed. by James Moffat, London, 1904, pp. 64-65.

23 History of Dogma, Vol. I, pp. 17-18.

24 Ibid., p. 41

> the fervant prayers into a solemn ritual, renunciation of the world into a jealous dominion over the world, the "spirit" into constraint and law?[25]

For Harnack there can be no doubt about the answer. This development was the product of the detachment of the gospel from the Jewish Church, an inevitable, but unfortunate process. As the gospel entered the Roman world and encountered Greek culture and opposing ideologies, it was forced to organize and to formulate its beliefs. The second century of the church was characterized by its victorious conflict with gnosticism and the Marcionite church, by the gradual development of ecclesiastical doctrine and institutionalism, and by the decay of early Christian enthusiasm.[26] In the remaining volumes Harnack describes the formation and variations of dogma through the story of the Catholic church, noting in particular the contribution of Augustine. At the time of the Reformation Harnack believes that Luther made some attempt to return to primitive Christianity and to emancipate religion from dogmas, but it was only a beginning and the task must again be taken up.

Harnack himself takes up the task of uncovering the essence of Christianity smothered beneath the corruption of dogma. He believes that although the rise and development of dogmatic formulation have obscured the message of Jesus it is still possible, by historical investigation, to find

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[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

[26] *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 1.

the kernel of truth in the husk of ecclesiastical doctrine. This essence alone will satisfy modern men who are baffled by the unintelligibility and the incredibility of the church's belief system. By a careful penetration back to the Jesus of the Galilean hills and his gospel it is possible to lay bare the essence of true religion.

In 1900 Harnack delivered a series of lectures which were published with the English title of What is Christianity? in which he attempted to state what he believed to be the central teachings of Jesus' gospel. His approach was to be historical. "What is Christianity?" asks Harnack. "It is solely in its historical sense that we shall try to answer this question here; that is to say, we shall employ the methods of historical science, and the experience of life gained by studying the actual course of history."[27] The materials in such an historical inquiry, Harnack explains, are three-fold: the Gospel records (Synoptics), the influence of Jesus on his contemporaries and the influence of Jesus through his disciples on subsequent history. Harnack lays the stress on history because, as he says, "the whole substance and meaning of religion--life in God, the forgiveness of sins, consolation in suffering--she [the Church] couples with Christ's person; and in so doing she associates everything that gives life its meaning and its permanence, nay the Eternal itself, with an historical fact; maintaining the

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[27] What is Christianity?, tr. by Thomas Bailey Saunders, London, 1901, p. 6.

indissoluble unity of both."[28]

At the outset of his investigation Harnack reveals his debt to the presuppositions of positivist historiography by insisting on the exclusion of the miraculous. "We are firmly convinced", he says, "that what happens in space and time is subject to the general laws of motion, and that in this sense, as an interruption of the order of nature, there can be no such thing as 'miracles'."[29] Even by limiting the sources of the inquiry to the Synoptic Gospels and by denying the possibility of the miraculous, it is still not an easy task to distinguish "between what is traditional and what is peculiar, between kernel and husk in Jesus' message...."[30] As a further guide Harnack appears to employ one more rule, though he might have objected to having it stated this way, and that is to define the essence of true religion before the investigation begins. True religion, and hence the religion of Jesus, "is not a question of angels and devils, thrones and principalities, but of God and the soul, the soul and its God"[31] or, as he says elsewhere, "religion is a relation of the soul to God, and nothing more."[32]

With these guidelines Harnack determines that the message of Jesus can be summarized under three main headings: (1) the Kingdom of God and its coming; (2) God the Father

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28 Christianity and History, tr. by Thomas Bailey Saunders, London, 1896, pp. 17-18.

29 What is Christianity?, p. 26.

30 Ibid., p. 55.

31 Ibid., p. 56.

32 Christianity and History, p. 41.

and the infinite value of the human soul; and (3) the higher righteousness and the commandment of love.[33] These three propositions are fairly obvious in their meaning but a few comments to clarify the exact way in which Harnack understood them may be helpful.

Let us look first at his understanding of the Kingdom of God. Harnack was aware that Christ's teaching concerning the Kingdom of God had been interpreted by J. Weiss and others as having a distinctly Jewish futuristic and apocolyptic reference, but he preferred to interpret it as the present rule of God the Father in an individual life. He writes:

> On the lips of Jesus the phrase, the 'Kingdom of heaven' or the 'Kingdom of God' means the sum total of all those great and holy influences which, feeding and nourishing the life of the soul, will gradually take shape and form within humanity, so that finally the whole human race shall be welded into a brotherhood, as inclusive as the whole of human life, and as profound as human need.[34]

Secondly, we should not miss the import of Harnack's teaching on the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son. Harnack is insistent that the gospel as Jesus proclaimed it had to do with the Father only and not the Son. Harnack felt it was necessary to return to the religion <u>of</u> Jesus, not the religion <u>about</u> Jesus. Jesus himself is brother to man, the only difference being that he possessed a perfect consciousness that God is Father and

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[33] <u>What is Christianity?</u>, p. 51.

[34] <u>A Scholar's Testament</u>, tr. by Olive Wyon, London, 1933, p. 1.

conceived of his mission as communicating this message to others. Jesus is not to be explained in terms of Greek metaphysics, but in terms of the life he lived. To understand what it means to assert that Jesus is the Christ as Peter did at Caesarea Philippi

> we must [Harnack writes] free our minds from all later false interpretation, above all we must leave ecclesiastical explanations alone, and think nothing 'metaphysical' or 'Trinitarian'. Rather we may paraphrase Peter's confession like this: 'You are the Promised One, promised to our forefathers, and the One for whom they waited, the One who will usher in the era of the holy rule of God over us; One who knows that God is his Father, and who possesses the power of implanting this knowledge as a vital energy within the hearts of men--not only in my heart, but in the heart of mankind as a whole.[35]

The death of Jesus is the supreme example of the principle of vicarious suffering and indeed the death knell to the need for sacrificial systems. Harnack rejects Christ's bodily resurrection and distinguishes between the Easter faith which he accepts and the Easter message which he rejects. Thus the importance of Jesus is found in the message he proclaims, that Almighty God is the ruler of the world and of every individual soul. Jesus is the religious genius of the human race who enjoyed a unique filial relationship to God. His teaching and his life fulfill the highest aspirations of our moral consciousness, and so we are convinced of the truth of his message. The fact "that

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[35] A Scholar's Testament, p. 28.

the whole of Jesus' message may be reduced to these two heads--God as Father, and the human soul so ennobled that it can and does unite with him--shows us that the Gospel is in nowise a positive religion like the rest; that it contains no statutory or particularistic elements; that it is, therefore, religion itself."[36]

Jesus' message had the great influence it did because his life and personality inspired men, and the flame he kindled had the power of continually re-kindling fresh flames of the same kind in the hearts of men of countless types. The man in the present feels the impact of Jesus' message because one loving spirit set another on fire, creating a chain right down to the present and because, with a certain amount of sensitivity, modern man is able to receive the flame of Christ's inspiration directly into his own soul so that "the sense of separation due to time and space vanishes into thin air."[37] "It was testified of Christ", Harnack explains, "that he was the Way, the Truth, and the Life; as such he is still revealed to our inmost feeling, and therein consists his presence to us."[38]

Thirdly and finally, we should note the application which Harnack gives to the message of Jesus. Our responsibility, as those who know God as Father, is to confront men with the message which Jesus lived and taught. With love as the

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36 What is Christianity?, p. 63.
37 A Scholar's Testament, p. 30.
38 Christianity and History, p. 49.

foundational principle of our lives, we are to work to bring about the reign of God the Father in the hearts and affairs of men and thereby establish the Kingdom of God on earth.

III. Concluding Observations

Although Adolph von Harnack's particular theological point of view has passed from the scene for many reasons, some of which we shall mention, there is still much that is positive in his work.[39] In the first place, one cannot help but be impressed with the sincerity, dedication, skill and scholarship which he brought to his work. His many scholarly volumes, and particularly his History of Dogma and Expansion of Christianity are and will be in the future necessary reading for the conscientious student of these subjects. And of course his What is Christianity? remains a monument to the era of classical liberal theology. The great ethical ideas which it enunciates still stir the sincere Christian to be a "man for others" even as the Jesus of the Galilean hills was such a man.

Secondly, we would call attention to the value of Harnack's emphasis on rediscovering the real and human Jesus. His general point that traditional theological formulations in their description of Jesus are more Greek than gospel is well taken. Whether his image of Jesus is the "real" Jesus is another question, but what is of importance is the

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39 Among Harnack's defenders when his theology was at the center of the theological debate was his translator, Thomas Bailey Saunders, who wrote Professor Harnack and His Oxford Critics, London, 1902.

conviction that the Jesus of history is the clue to the whole Christian theological endeavor.

Of positive note also is his concern to make the Christian message speak with relevancy and force to his generation. This is the perennial responsibility of theology, and indeed it has little value if it does not fulfill this function. Because Harnack did not take this responsibility lightly, he attempted to meet what he considered to be the objections of his generation to Christian faith by side-stepping traditional theological approaches to Christ and by returning to the Jesus of history. In itself such an effort is worthy of commendation, but whether he succeeded in establishing the validity of his method and conclusions is what we must now determine. It is our contention that Harnack did not wholly succeed because he allowed both his method and his conclusions to be too greatly controlled by the ideals of his culture.[40]

Specifically, Harnack failed at the very point where he should have been the strongest, namely in historical method. His failure was that he allowed his theological presuppositions to damage his historical objectivity. The Jesus whom he discovers is but a pale reflection of the liberal ideal rather than the Jesus about whom the New Testament speaks. Harnack's method of analyzing the Gospel records with the scheme of kernel and husk too easily opened up the possibility

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40 Harnack's critics were numerous in his own time. See e.g. W. Sanday, "An Examination of Harnack's What is Christianity?," London, 1901; A.J. Mason, Christianity: What is it?, London, 1902; and Herman Cremer, A Reply to Harnack on the Essence of Christianity, tr. by Bernhard Pick, New York, 1903.

of setting aside material which did not fit in with his preconceived image of Jesus. Yet this material cannot be so easily laid aside in the effort to find the real Jesus. As a result, the Jesus whom he produces is a product of his liberal imagination, not the Jewish Rabbi from Nazareth. Harnack's Jesus is lifted out of his Sitz im Leben. With a somewhat Marcionite attitude toward the Old Testament, Harnack moralizes the Old Testament character of Jesus' teaching, especially in reference to the Kingdom of God. In Harnack's formulation it has lost its apocalyptic and eschatological reference and has been reduced to the present reign of the Father in individual lives.

In fact Harnack's whole effort to sustain the Christian faith by a simple appeal to what he considers to be the teachings and personality of Jesus is questionable on historical grounds and was challenged in his own time. In reply he wrote: "But they [the teachings of Jesus] lose no particle of their power and validity, unless it can be shown that the main lineament of the personality of Christ, and the sense and true point of his sayings, have been altered. I cannot discover that historical criticism has effected any such change."[41] Yet time and again in his own historical criticism he has done just this. Because of his positivistic and liberal humanistic presuppositions, he has rejected much

41 Christianity and History, p. 56.

of the historical record. Most of the New Testament, with the exception of the Synoptics, has been set aside as of no historical value. Even the apocalyptic and eschatological elements have been purged from the Synoptics. In reference to the futuristic note in Jesus' teaching Harnack writes: "I admit if historical research had proved that he was an apocalyptic enthusiast...it would be another matter."[42] But has not this element in Jesus' teaching been established beyond all doubt now, and was it not always there for any who had eyes to see it? Harnack, sensing the problem and valiantly trying to overcome it, continues: "Woe to us...if our faith rested on a number of details to be demonstrated and established by the historian....Testimonies, documents, assertions--when all is said, to what do they amount?" "But", he goes on to write, "the spiritual purport of a whole life, of a personality, is also an historical fact; it has its reality in the effect which it produces; and it is here that we find the link that binds us to Jesus Christ."[43] But how can we know the personality without the details? And it is certainly very tricky business to attempt to reconstruct from the effects in people's lives the personality which is their cause.

As a result of such a historical method the New Testament teaching about the gospel is greatly reduced. Perhaps the

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42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., pp. 60-61.

real issue is whether the Christ of the apostolic witness can be rejected and replaced by a Jesus of modern reflection. Evidently this is what Harnack does and concludes that a person like the Christ of the New Testament preaching is an impossibility. So instead of building a theology on the biblical Christ he maintains that the essence of religion consists in the ideas of Jesus' message rather than in his person. Jesus, in the end of the day, is separable from the unusual truths he taught. Ultimately, history and idea can be separated. Because "we know that there are few among us who hear and understand the voice of God, in the secret sphere of their inner personal life, without human help and intervention..."[44] we can see the importance but not the necessity of Jésus. Though Jesus was the first to think these thoughts and proclaim them with clarity, it could have been someone else. As Emil Brunner says in respect to Harnack's view: "The Gospel itself and the faith which corresponds to it have nothing whatever to do with the historical fact."[45] According to Harnack, we know that Jesus' message is true, not because he proclaimed it as the Son of God, but because our moral experience senses that it is so. The idea of the "inestimable inherent value of every human soul", the idea of God as Father and the message of the communion of brethren realizing itself in love are universal truths of religion[46]

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[44] Christianity and History, p. 43.
[45] The Mediator, p. 67.
[46] History of Dogma, Vol. I, p. 70.

which may be separated from the particularities of history. Our Kantian moral sense judges them valid and German liberal culture finds them ennobling. The extraneous features of theology, ecclesiastical structure and worship are unnecessary.

It was the dialectical theologians of the early twentieth century who saw clearly the limitations of this liberal approach epitomized in Harnack. We now proceed to their criticisms and reformulations as they take form in the thought of Emil Brunner.

Chapter Ten

History and the Dialectical Theology of the Twentieth Century: Emil Brunner

I. Brunner in Context

We have been attempting to show the importance of preunderstanding in representative historical interpretations of the Christian faith. We have argued that the interpreter can do justice to the given in Christianity only when he stands within faith and when he employs an adequate historical methodology. Both are necessary for either one without the other inevitably leads to a distortion. The affirmation of faith without the historical check can lead to the postulation of any religious belief which is emotionally satisfying, and the historical methodology without the preunderstanding of faith means the imposition of a point of view which, because it is not in sympathy with the nature of the given, twists the Christian message to fit its own perspective. We have maintained that all of the interpretations which have been examined so far, though valuable and impressive to be sure, have nevertheless failed in various ways to meet the demands of these two criteria.

In the Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, we find a man whose understanding of the Christian faith comes very close to meeting the requirements of both faith and history.[1] If

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[1] A good introduction to Brunner's thought which also contains a bibliography of his writing is The Theology of Emil Brunner, ed. by Charles W. Kegley, New York, 1962.

he fails at all, and we will argue that he partially does, it is in his insistence that faith must necessarily be removed from the relativities of history. But before we can justify such a statement we must look closely at the factors making up his preunderstanding and their influence on his historical interpretation of the Christian faith.

Because a man's thought is seldom removed from the circumstances of his life, it would be wise in our desire to understand Brunner's thought to sketch a few biographical facts.[2] He was born on December 23, 1889, in the Canton of Zurich, the cradle of the Swiss Reformation. From childhood he was surrounded by mementos of a glorious theological past including the cathedral where Zwingli had preached. The influence of the history and thought of the Reformation would be hard to escape in such an environment. After his training at the Gymnasium, he turned to the study of theology at the universities of Zurich and Berlin. He then went to Union Theological Seminary in New York which was a center for religious liberalism, then at its peak of influence in the United States. On returning to Switzerland in 1912, Brunner became a minister of a Swiss Reformed church. After a year of serving as a pastor, he went to England to teach high school in Leeds. He returned to Switzerland in 1916 to become pastor of a church in the Canton of Glarus.

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[2] I am indebted to Paul K. Jewett, Emil Brunner, Chicago, 1961, for this outline of Brunner's life.

Brunner had been trained in his theological studies as a liberal. His first book, which was a study of symbolism in religious knowledge and an effort to "get beyond Schleiermacher", reflects this orientation. Gradually, however, a profound change began to take place in his viewpoint while he pastored the church in Glarus. This was due in large measure to his conviction that the theology in which he had been trained was not able to speak relevantly to his people and to the conditions of a world lost in war. When Karl Barth's revolutionary Römerbrief appeared in 1919, Brunner immediately declared himself to be of this new theological persuasion in a review of Barth's book, and he soon became one of the leading exponents of Barth's theological position. It was not long before he was appointed a Privatdozent on the theological faculty of the University of Zurich, and later, on the basis of the publication of his penetrating critique of Schleiermacher's theology in Die Mystik und das Wort, he was promoted to Professor of Theology at the same university, a position which he actively held until 1953.

Among the important incidents in Brunner's life and one of the more lively theological debates of our century occurred in the 1930's when he and Barth came to a parting of the ways over the question of natural theology.[3] Brunner insisted that there is a "broken natural revelation" of God in the

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[3] See Natural Theology, Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply "No" by Dr. Karl Barth, London, 1946.

human heart, i.e. even though men have been corrupted by sin they still retain a minimum of knowledge about God and some capacity to hear and understand the gospel. Brunner argued that if it were not for this point of contact (a sort of built-in preunderstanding) preaching would be useless. Barth countered with his now famous "nein" and maintained that the Holy Spirit does not need any point of contact but creates His own.

In addition to his teaching, writing and the demands of theological debate, Brunner also found time to be interested in the Oxford Group movement and took part in the effort of this group to meet the needs of lay Christians which he felt were not being met by the established churches. This activity is significant because it points to Brunner's own sense of mission and his conviction that relationship with God is preeminently a personal affair.

As Brunner's importance as a theologian became recognized he received and accepted the invitation to become a visiting lecturer at Princeton Seminary in New Jersey and at Union Theological Seminary in New York. The stimulation of this year for all concerned was heightened by the fact that the theological right joined the theological left to challenge his position. In addition to this lectureship he delivered addresses in many of the leading theological centers in both Europe and America.

In 1949 he travelled to various parts of Asia and the

Far East and was especially impressed with Japan. To the surprise of the theological world he returned to Japan in 1953 and, at the the age of sixty-three, accepted the chair of Christian philosophy at the International Christian University. He went, as he said, "to spend a few of the last years God will give me on the missionary battle-front."[4] Because of his wife's failing health he was forced to cut short his stay and return to Switzerland in 1955. On the way home he suffered a stroke which handicapped him for the rest of his life. He died in 1967.

It is impossible with a man of Brunner's stature to isolate all of the factors which went into forming his pre-understanding. Yet not to make some effort to at least estimate the impact of certain men and events would be to ignore what Brunner himself acknowledged.[5] In that our concern is primarily with defining the presuppositions which guide his understanding and interpretation of history, we will focus our attention on the factors which contributed to their development.

Not at all unimportant in the formation of the ideological aspect of the preunderstanding which undergirds Brunner's historical interpretation of the Christian faith was his exposure to the thought of Søren Kierkegaard whom Brunner calls "incomparably the greatest apologist or 'eristic'

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4 Quoted by Elmer G. Homrighausen, "Brunner Goes to Japan", Theology Today (January, 1954), 537.

5 See "Intellectual Autobiography", in Kegley, ed., The Theology of Emil Brunner, pp. 3-20.

thinker of the Christian faith within the sphere of Protestantism."[6] Kierkegaard (1813-1855) anticipated in a remarkable way the reaction of many twentieth century theologians, including Brunner, to the characteristic nineteenth century solutions of the problems which the rise of positivistic historiography had created for theology.[7] Faith, Kierkegaard argued, was not to be founded upon historical research which can neither verify it nor refute it. Faith is rather the acceptance of the "Absolute Paradox", that the Eternal God has entered history, was born an infant and grew to manhood as other men do. Even the contemporaries of Jesus were in no better position to understand the paradox than those who lived eighteen centuries afterward, for it can be known only subjectively, not historically. Those who accept the paradox are "contemporary" with Jesus just as surely as the apostles themselves. All scholarly effort to reconstruct the life of Jesus, while not to be scoffed at, is really irrelevant to faith. Even the most brilliant reconstruction would yield only approximate results and would therefore provide an inadequate basis for man's eternal happiness. The absolute paradox can be known only by being believed on the attestation of the apostles. This assertion of Kierkegaard's is a fundamental presupposition of Brunner's understanding of history. It is a major influence on his views and functions

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[6] The Christian Doctrine of God, Dogmatics, Vol. I, tr. by Olive Wyon, London, 1960, p. 100.

[7] See his Philosophical Fragments.

consistently and consciously throughout his interpretation.

Also influential on the development of the ideological aspect of Brunner's preunderstanding was the personalist philosophy of Ferdinand Ebner.[8] It was Ebner who first introduced Brunner to the concept of I-Thou, not Martin Buber whose development of I-Thou philosophy appeared independently of Ebner's.[9] The centrality of the I-Thou concept in Brunner's thought is demonstrated in his book Wahrheit als Begegnung[10] in which he argues that our knowledge of God is to be contrasted sharply from "objective" knowledge. The true alternative is not subjective knowledge, as one would expect, especially in light of his high opinion of Kierkegaard, but personal relationship. God is truly known only in an I-Thou relation rather than by historical investigation. We will discover when we look more closely at Brunner's view of history that this too is one of his basic presuppositions.

Equally important in the formation of Brunner's preunderstanding was his Reformation heritage. To the great reformers, Luther and Calvin, with their emphasis on the

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8 See Paul K. Jewett, "Ebnerian Personalism and Its Influence on Brunner's Theology", The Westminster Theological Journal (May, 1952).

9 "Comments by Brunner", The Reformed Review (January, 1956), 33. Brunner writes: "Please note that I was never conscious of being strictly influenced by Martin Buber. I read I-Thou many years after my Man in Revolt....My eyes were opened by Ferdinand Ebner.

10 Published in English first as The Divine-Human Encounter, London, 1943, and later revised as Truth as Encounter, London, 1964.

centrality of the Word of God, Brunner owes his theological orientation.[11] That God has spoken His Word to men in Jesus Christ is, for Brunner, the key which unlocks the meaning of history.

Coupled with his rootage in Reformation theology is another source of his preunderstanding, namely the new theological movement in which he played such an active role, variously called New Reformation theology, the Theology of the Word, Neo-orthodoxy, Crisis theology and Dialectical theology.[12] Here we must look in some detail at what motivated this new movement.

On the negative side, it was motivated by its reaction to a liberal theology which had failed to speak an authoritative word to a generation shaken by the First World War and the ominous decline of Western Europe. In the first two decades of the twentieth century the theology of Ritschl expressed in the liberal Protestantism of the Harnack type was paramount. There was confidence in the ability of historical research to get behind the Gospels to the real Jesus of history and to measure the influence of his powerful personality on his contemporaries which was the source of genuine religious experience.[13] Also shaping the theological scene of these decades was the practice of the religionsgeschichtliche Schule of W. Bousset, R. Reitzenstein, W.

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[11] John Macquarrie, Twentieth Century Religious Thought, London, 1964, p. 318.

[12] Ibid., p. 319.

[13] See above, ch. 9.

Heitmüller, E. Troeltsch and others to regard the particular events of the Gospel history such as the Virgin Birth, the miracles, the Resurrection and Ascension "as instances of the general tendency of all religion to proliferate legendary and miraculous occurrences for the edification of the faithful."[14] Behind this tendency was the positivist presupposition that particular historical instances lead to general laws just as in natural science. The events of biblical history could be explained according to the laws of the development of religion in general and could be articulated by the science of comparative religion. It goes without saying that there was no room in this view for God as a category for historical explanation. Brunner writes in 1929 of this theological climate: "From 1700 A.D. to 1900 A.D. Christian theology changes its distinctively Christian bearings and drifts with an idealistic immanence-faith into theological liberalism. The year 1900 marks the approximate date when it began to sink into a sea of relativistic skepticism."[15]

Equally unacceptable to this new school of theology was Protestant Orthodoxy which, it was maintained, blindly ignored the historical problems raised by the science of biblical criticism and whose view of propositional revelation corrupted faith by making it intellectual assent rather than personal commitment. "Orthodoxy errs", Brunner writes, "in its

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[14] Richardson, History Sacred and Profane, p. 128.
[15] The Theology of Crisis, New York, 1929.

insistence on the rigidity and finality of its form, which, because of its lack of critical insight, it assumes to be essential to its existence."[16]

The alternative to the devitalizing historical skepticism of liberalism and the anachronistic verbal inerrancy of Orthodoxy was the "Theology of the Word" with its primary emphasis on allowing men to hear what God has to say to them. This new theological orientation denied that there was any way from man to God. Rather God has come to man and spoken His Word in Jesus Christ. The knowledge of God, inaccessible from man's side because of his finitude and sinfulness, is made available to faith by God's free act of grace. God's Word is known in Jesus Christ to whom the Bible bears witness and whom the church proclaims in her preaching.

The other labels of this movement also depict something of its character. It has been called Neo-orthodoxy because of its desire to recapture the spirit of the Reformation as the classical period of Protestant thought. The title "Theology of Crisis" is not a reference to the crisis of the First World War but a reference to the crisis which is the judgment of the divine Word upon the world and man's critical position of having to decide when personally confronted with the Word of judgment and grace.[17] We have chosen the label "Dialectical theology" because of its emphasis on the para-

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16 Ibid., p. 18.

17 Brunner, The Word and the World, London, 1931, p. 7.

doxical nature of truth. The whole movement has been characterized by its insistence that God cannot be spoken of in some simple formula, but must be spoken of paradoxically, balancing each affirmation with a corresponding negation in order to do justice to the God who infinitely transcends our finite creaturely being. Brunner in 1931 was willing to describe his theology in this way. He wrote:

> It is only by means of the contradiction between two ideas--God and man, grace and responsibility, holiness and love--that we can apprehend the contradictory truth that the eternal God enters time, or that sinful man is declared just. Dialectical theology is the mode of thinking which defends this paradoxical character, belonging to faith-knowledge, from the non-paradoxical speculation of reason, and vindicates it as against the other.[18]

All of these ideological concepts--Kiekegaard's "Absolute Paradox", I-Thou personalism, the Reformation emphasis on the Word of God and the central themes of the New Reformation theology--we will find present in Brunner's interpretation of history.

The central attitude (or complex of attitudes) operative in Brunner's interpretation is his own personal faith in the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. Brunner interprets the historical dimension of the Christian revelation from within faith.[19] This attitude, given a specific direction toward historical understanding by the ideological presuppositions that we have ennumerated, is of course a major

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18 *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

19 Macquarrie, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

influence on his views. It is comprehensive in scope and functions consistently and consciously throughout his interpretation. Other attitudes such as honesty, fairness, objectivity and open-mindedness are also in evidence in Brunner's treatment.

His methodological assumptions are essentially those of the historical critical method. He accepts the method (and conclusions) of higher criticism and does not allow his faith to dull his sensitivity to historical evidence.

We must now examine how Brunner's preunderstanding with its ideological, attitudinal and methodological components manifests itself in his historical interpretation of the Christian faith.

II. Brunner's Concept of History

The role which Brunner's preunderstanding has in his view can best be understood if we turn first to his theology.[20] He shares with Karl Barth the conviction that the theme of history is the history of the covenant of grace, that God's acts in the affairs of men (Heilsgeschichte) are the true history by which all other history is determined.[21] Because his understanding of history is entwined with his theology, it shares with his theology a dialectical dimension and, as a result, tends to be difficult to describe in a straight-

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[20] See Kegley, ed., The Theology of Emil Brunner, pp. 157-174.

[21] See Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Vol. III/I, pp. 59 ff.

forward way. Frustrated by this aspect of Brunner's thought, John Hesselink remarks: "I have been reading Brunner's works since college days in 1948 and have read intensively almost everything of Brunner's in English this past two years. Yet I would be the first to confess that just about the time I think I understand how Brunner stands--for example on the crucial problem of history--I am unsettled by finding a new problem on rereading an old passage."[22] To this remark Brunner replied: "If you are baffled by my conception of history--this is just one case where I differ from everybody, as far as I know."[23] These comments give some indication of the complexity of Brunner's view.

The theological problem which Brunner attempts to solve and which forces him to articulate his view of history is this: How does one ground Christian faith in a historical revelation in such a way as to avoid the relativities of history? Protestant Liberalism with its history of religion and psychology of religion schools had taught that there is no absolute truth. Brunner calls this "historicism" and rejects it. Faith, he asserts, can never embrace the relative but only that which is true for all men in whatever period of history they live. Brunner also rejects any form of idealism which, in its effort to escape the uncertainty of historical

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22 "Encounter in Japan: Emil Brunner, An Interpretation", The Reformed Review (January, 1956), 22.

23 Ibid., p. 33.

truth, refines Christianity into a set of eternal ideas. And the return to orthodoxy according to Brunner is scientifically hopeless in the light of modern criticism. To accept the biblical narrative as a completely reliable record is possible only for one who ignores the results of biblical criticism.

The clue to Brunner's way out of the either/or of liberalism and orthodoxy is found in his definition of revelation.[24] God Himself enters into history in the person of Jesus Christ to perform once and for all the decisive act of history. In Jesus Christ the impossible happens: the Infinite becomes finite, the Eternal becomes temporal and the Divine becomes human. Revelation is "the coming of God", a wonder that breaks into the world from beyond the world, and hence is neither idea nor history. Revelation is an event, yet it is not in the same category as other historical events. The revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ is a point in time which is tangent to eternity, a qualification of the stream of time from the perspective of eternity. This intervention from beyond in Jesus Christ is the center of God's revelatory acts in the affairs of men.

> The center of the Bible and of the history of revelation is the revelation in the Incarnation of the Word, Jesus Christ. From Him as the Center we see the primal revelation in the Creation as the revelation of the eternal Word; from Him

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[24] See Paul K. Jewett, Emil Brunner's Concept of Revelation, London, 1954.

> as the Center, although only in a mirror darkly, we know a final, fulfilling revelation, where we shall not 'believe', but we shall see Him 'face to face'. Therefore He is the unity of all the revelations.[25]

Brunner's doctrine of Scripture is closely tied to his view of revelation. Two points regarding his treatment of this doctrine are germane to our discussion. First, the Scriptures are the human testimonies which give us the primary witness to the objective and historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and therefore they have the authority of a norm. Secondly, we are not required to believe the Scriptures because they are the Scriptures but because Christ meets us in them.[26] The Word of Scripture is truth in a subjective and personal sense.[27] Thus the Bible according to Brunner is the witness to the "revealing action of God in a twofold stooping to man; historically objective, in the Incarnation of the Son, and inwardly subjective, in the witness borne to the Son through the Spirit in the heart of man...."[28] This twofold structuring is characteristic of Brunner and supplies a key to the understanding of his view of history.

The response of man to God's self-revelation in Jesus

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25 Brunner, Revelation and Reason, tr. by Olive Wyon, London, 1947, p. 198.

26 The Christian Doctrine of God, p. 110.

27 Brunner, Eternal Hope, tr. by Olive Wyon, London, 1954, p. 184.

28 The Christian Doctrine of God, p. 29.

Christ is faith. It is in faith, Brunner writes, that "God's self-communication finds its completion. For here and here only...does God's self manifestation, self-revelation and self-communication reach its goal."[29] Faith is the point in man's consciousness where he grasps what God has done in revelation. Faith is man's appropriate relation to the historical appearance of Jesus Christ. But note that faith is not intellectual certainty about historical fact, but the acceptance of a communication, for in faith "Another communicates to me the mystery that only He knows--namely that He loves me."[30] Thus Brunner can say that "the certainty of faith lies in another plane than the secular certainty of historical facts."[31]

Brunner's understanding of faith leads us to the consideration of one final specifically theological point before we examine, in light of his theology, his direct statements about history. This final point is his assertion that primary truth is essentially personal. Brunner reasons that "if God is the primary reality, then the Word of God is the primary truth. Thus truth is not to be found either in the object or the subject, but beyond both, Truth then, is God Himself in His self-communication."[32] The truth which is

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[29] The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith and the Consummation, Dogmatics, Vol. III, tr. by David Cairns, London, 1964, p. 171.

[30] Ibid., p. 259.

[31] Brunner, The Scandal of Christianity, London, 1951, p. 25.

[32] Christianity and Civilization: First Part: Foundations, p. 40.

revealed to faith "is not truth in the sense of knowing something, but in the sense of a divine-human, personal encounter. God does not reveal this or that; He does not reveal a number of truths. He reveals Himself by communicating Himself."[33] Knowledge of God comes in personal address, in an I-Thou encounter in contrast to objective knowledge which seeks to get power over that which is known and to learn how to manipulate it. In objective knowledge the knower is detached and has no vital concern or communion with the object. God, however, is not another object who is subject to our control, but a Person to whom we relate in trustful obedience. But this does not mean that the historical is unimportant. Brunner is careful to point out that "the first and decisive element is the historical, the truth that is not in us but comes to us."[34] Yet we perceive this truth in encounter as we hear the Word of the Thou. Thus the historical and personal character of truth are necessarily linked together. Is the truth of God's revelation then historical truth? Brunner answers in his typically dialectical and somewhat ambiguous fashion when he says "Yes and no. Yes, for it is in history that this revealed secret encounters me as truth. No, for it is the Eternal God who now speaks to me in this historical revelation. Thereby the historical event ceases to be historical and becomes living presence."[35]

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33 Ibid., p. 37.

34 Truth as Encounter, p. 21.

35 Christianity and Civilization: First Part. p. 40.

For Brunner, then, the Christian revelation belongs to a decisive once-for-all act of God in history. This revelation is attested to in the words of Scripture and grasped by personal faith in a divine-human encounter where God in Christ meets man. This construction involves Brunner in the delicate balancing act of preserving both the historical foundation and yet the non-historical nature of revelation. He will not give up either and insists on preserving the paradox. Just how he sustains this dialectical formulation of the doctrine of revelation leads us to consider in more detail his statements regarding history.

The way in which Brunner hangs on to the historical aspect of revelation is by positing a different realm of history than that which concerns the secular historian. He shares with Barth, Cullmann and others the contention that the miraculous revelation of the Word of God takes place in the realm of super-history. Brunner writes: "What we believe as Christians, we believe because something particular has taken place in history. This particular thing that has happened in history we call saving history (Heilsgeschichte), or the history of salvation, or the history of revelation, or the historical revelation."[36] The central fact of saving history is the event of Jesus Christ. This fact of the Word becoming flesh is the center of the divine manifestation and

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[36] The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, Dogmatics, Vol. II, tr. by Olive Wyon, London, 1964, p. 193.

is a unique event. God is intensely concerned with human history, and in the fullness of time, he intervened in it. Even more, at a certain point in this time process, God Himself enters the scenery of temporal life. The Eternal appears in the shape of a historical person and as such performs once and for all the decisive act of all history. The personal God enters into the stream of time in a historical personality, Jesus of Nazareth, "crucified under Pontius Pilate."

But God's entrance into history in the person of Jesus Christ is on a different plane of history from that which the secular historical method can investigate. The aim of historical science, according to Brunner, "is primarily to fill in the spatio-temporal continuum to the analogous continuum; that is, to that which we call the sum total of all the possibilities of nature and history."[37] What Brunner seems to be saying in this definition is that the historical method is limited in its understanding of historical causality and explanation to the natural world. Therefore, in this sense of the word, the Christian faith is not concerned with history at all. It is related to history in that the unique event of Christ's appearance took place in history, but it does not gain its essential character from its historical connection. Precisely because something super-historical

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[37] The Mediator, p. 160.

and decisive has entered into human history, to faith history means something entirely different from its meaning in all other forms of thought. Jesus Christ is truly historical, yet he transcends all historical barriers. As Brunner explains: "The fact that Christ was 'sent' is not a movement within history; it is the entrance of the non-historical element into the world of history."[38]

Brunner is careful at this point not to speak about the entrance of idea or eternal truth into history via a human personality. Any slip into "universal religion" or ontology would be for Brunner to lose everything. All depends on the fact that the Word became flesh and that the Eternal has entered into the sphere of external historical fact. Jesus Christ can only be our Redeemer if he was crucified in time and space upon the hill of Calvary. The divine self-manifestation is enclosed within a real historical human life. But "this does not mean that this life, in its historical extension and its visible character, as such constitutes the revelation."[39] If this were so, argues Brunner, the extent of our knowledge of this history would constitute the extent of our faith. There is no direct identity between the life of Jesus and revelation. Brunner insists that the "flesh" is not the "Word", though the two are nearly impossible to separate. The identity which exists between the two is not direct but

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38 Ibid., p. 311.
39 Ibid., p. 355.

indirect. The historical extension and visible character of Jesus' life do not in themselves constitute the event of revelation, but without this visible history there would have been no event at all. Brunner continues: "The central element in this life, which makes it absolutely decisive for us, is the 'word' which this event contains. But this 'word' is not an idea, a truth, a thought, but a personal reality."[40] To tie revelation to historical event would be to subordinate it to the universal order of history whereas in reality it is a category by itself, i.e. it is unique (einmalige) and hence not a part of history.

The basic reason why Brunner does not want to link revelation to history in what he considers to be the ordinary meaning of the word is because history of necessity deals in probabilities and hence cannot provide security for faith. "Dependence on history as a science", he writes, "leads to a state of hopeless uncertainty. Therefore, when a thoughtful person refuses to build his relation to the eternal on anything so unsafe as historical science, he is acting rightly; for such building is indeed a glaring example of building one's house upon the sand."[41] The reconstruction of the past belongs to the realm of empirical knowledge which can never arrive at absolute certainty but only probability. If faith were founded on history then it would find itself involved

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40 Ibid., p. 356.
41 Ibid., p. 156.

in the intolerable self-contradiction of assuming the unconditional certainty of what was only provisionally and relatively certain.[42] The brute facts of history are a necessary presupposition but never an adequate ground for the knowledge of Christ.

Where then does the Christian find certainty for his faith if not through historical science? In short he finds it in faith itself. Brunner maintains that the manner of verifying historical facts which are important for faith such as the crucifixion differs for faith and for historical science. Faith is sure on the basis of the witness to Christ of the apostles whereas the historian seeks verification through critical and rational processes.[43] The trouble with such an approach on the part of the historian is that he explains the revelatory events from a point of view which is alien to their meaning. But it is only faith which is able to rightly perceive these events. As Brunner puts it: "the meaning of that history in which Christ manifested himself is only revealed to faith."[44] It is the presupposition of faith that the one whom faith calls Christ can only be known as Christ through faith, whereas he must be regarded as mere man, though a remarkable one, from any other point of view. A uniform interpretation of the life and character of Jesus is an impossible task for scientific study because the

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42 Brunner, The Philosophy of Religion, p. 160.
43 The Mediator, p. 165.
44 Ibid., p. 161.

hidden unity of this life, which is the key to understanding it, the Person of the God-man, is not human and historical at all. Only he who brings the presupposition of faith can understand this life.[45] Faith in Jesus as the Christ is identical with the true perception of the historical reality of Jesus. Thus through faith the historical fact of Jesus Christ becomes a certainty to the believer whereas the same historical fact is distorted by inadequate preunderstanding and given only probability in the continuum of history by the historian.

As a consequence of this position the activities of Jesus during his earthly life have less than central bearing upon the faith of Christians. In that the validity of the Christian faith does not rest upon historical science, there can be no conflict between criticism and faith. In fairness to Brunner it should be mentioned that because of the criticism of Paul Althaus he has affirmed the importance and reliability of the story of Jesus in the Gospels for faith, a position which he did not maintain forcefully in Der Mittler.[46] Nevertheless Brunner sees no need to be worried about the negative results of biblical criticism as long as the central affirmations are not disproved, for "faith...knows, for reasons which are not accessible to the historian as such, that this inquiry cannot yield a negative result."[47]

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45 Ibid., p. 360.

46 See Revelation and Reason, p. 284n.

47 The Mediator, p. 166.

But for academic thoroughness, Brunner does ask the question whether there is an insurmountable conflict between historical research and the Jesus Christ known by faith. After a thorough study of all aspects of the problem Brunner concludes that "In spite of all sceptical suggestions, there is a hard core of tradition, which cannot be eliminated, and which emerges intact from every critical examination, however searching and meticulous it may be."[48] Even the most intensive historical criticism (e.g. Bultmann's Jesus) leaves more than enough of the Gospel "portrait" and its picture of the central person to inspire and support faith. This historical account of Jesus agrees on the main points with the apostolic witness to Christ. The refusal to acknowledge this cannot be sustained by an appeal to historical reason. Such a rejection can only be based on a philosophy of life which by inner necessity is forced to arbitrarily manipulate and transform the facts.[49]

In summary, Brunner, to escape the relativities and inadequacies of historical science as a means of establishing faith, posits the realm of Heilsgeschichte where God breaks into human history from outside to reveal Himself in Jesus Christ. Faith makes this revelatory act certain for the believer whereas the secular historian confined to the natural order for historical explanation is unable to grasp its full meaning.

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[48] The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, p. 243.
[49] Ibid., p. 327.

III. Evaluation

There is much that we agree with in Brunner's interpretation of the historical dimension of the Christian faith. The general structure of his interpretation comes close to meeting the twin demands which we have previously established, i.e. the recognition of faith as the necessary preunderstanding to correctly perceiving and interpreting the Christ-event and the application of a scientific historical methodology to the historical material. On the first point Brunner could not be more explicit. He insists that it is faith alone which is able to grasp God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The detached and non-sympathetic historian will never be able to understand in depth the person and work of Jesus Christ because he lacks a proper preunderstanding. He does not come with the personal relationship of faith without which it would be unlikely for him to assert that Jesus is the Christ, and not to do so would be to miss the essential point for proper comprehension.

Neither do we find failure on Brunner's part at the level of historical methodology. He roams skillfully through the maze of biblical-historical scholarship, keenly aware of the issues and problems. It is not Brunner's inadequacy as a historical scholar that is questionable. But where we do have reservations is how Brunner employs (or does not employ) historical knowledge in his theology. What we have in mind specifically is the use made of the concept of Heilsgeschichte.

We do not question that God has been and is at work in history nor that He has acted specifically and dramatically in the history of Israel and centrally and definitively in Jesus Christ. What makes us uneasy is the tendency to assume that because there is a Heilsgeschichte one need not be concerned with the problems of history in the establishment of an adequate foundation for faith. It is altogether too easy to say that the secular historian has no access to the redemptive events and therefore our faith is secure from his critical investigations. To assert that Jesus rose from the dead and then argue that this fact cannot be touched by the historical method is to be driven into a realm of super-history where the critics cease from troubling and the faithful are at rest. We would agree with Brunner that faith is a necessary pre-understanding to apprehending the full efficacious meaning of the resurrection yet is it not still necessary for the historian *qua* historian, even though he is a believer, to subject the resurrection to an examination of the evidence? Is it legitimate to sever faith from history in this way? Unfortunately it appears that this is what Brunner appears to do when he writes that "the assertions of faith, even where they include an historical fact, are emphatically statements of *faith*, that is, they are real assertions which are attained in connection with faith, and not in connection with historical reasearch."[50] As John McIntyre points out, there seems to be

[50] *The Mediator*, pp. 164-65.

"a fear that if historical knowledge were to turn out to be genuine knowledge, then faith would rest on something less than Christ himself."[51] Would it not be better to say that faith rests on the Christ who is accessible to historical verification?

Ultimately this disengagement of faith from history leads to a kind of dialectical double-talk because those who make the separation really cannot reconcile themselves to its implications. In this Brunner seems to be no exception. He vehemently maintains our redemption rests on real historical facts, e.g. without Passion history there can be no message of the cross, but also speaks of the non-historical nature of revelation. But if revelation must have a historical foundation, i.e. if it occurs in history, is it not then really historical? And does not the position seem to lead to a logical contradiction? For as long as Brunner holds to the Kiekegaardian time/eternity dialectic, history would of necessity be in the sphere of the relative. But since revelation is the communication of absolute truth in which the eternal becomes historical, we have the impossible situation of the absolutizing of the relative. Pleas for preserving the paradoxical nature of truth at this point sound a little bit like an easy way out. It is not the paradox of the Eternal becoming temporal that we are objecting to here, but the failure of Brunner to accept its consequences, namely

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[51] The Shape of Christology, p. 121.

that revelation is truly historical in nature.

One wonders also if Brunner's fear of resting faith on historical probability is justified. Does not the concept of faith inherently contain a measure of uncertainty? Does not faith cease to be faith when everything is crystal clear? And is it not possible to smuggle in a note of anti-intellectualism when we are afraid to take our chances on the plane of plain history. Further, does Brunner not make a false enemy out of the so called secular historian? If that which we put our faith in will not stand up under historical scrutiny, then maybe we had better let it go. It is true of course that there is nothing which resembles anti-intellectualism in Brunner. Yet the question still remains: Is he justified in his insistence of the non-historical nature of revelation?

The fundamental issue at stake in our criticism of Brunner's interpretation of history is whether there is one history or two. We would argue that the distinction between secular history and super-history creates more problems than it solves. If one begins with an understanding of history where no distinction is made between events and their meaning, and where everything that happens does so within the providence of God, then most of the difficulties of Brunner's formulation disappear. If all action is seen as a unity because God is the true subject of history, of <u>all</u> history, then faith need not be separated from history. Where Brunner fails is in his

uncritical acceptance of the presuppositions of positivist historiography. It is his acceptance of the positivist definition of history which forces him into the realm of super-history. If he were more willing to define history in biblical categories (which he clearly understands) and less willing to allow the secular historian to dictate what can and cannot happen in history, then it would be unnecessary for him to try to maintain some semblance of historical revelation by a clever dialectical maneuver. He would be able to accept at face value that the "Word was made flesh". Such a view of history would also be better suited to giving meaning to the vast range and complexity of world history. Surely the God who is Creator and who became incarnate in Jesus Christ is concerned about the totality of history and not just one isolated segment. Nor would such a concept of history necessarily lead to the objectivization of faith or have to deny that faith is essentially personal relationship with God. Faith could be firmly tied to historical revelation while at the same time maintaining the contemporaniety of the I-Thou relation. The church has always taught that what happened in history nearly two thousand years ago is made a present reality by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life. In a word, Brunner ultimately fails to do justice to the historical nature of revelation.

Chapter Eleven

Faith and History: Reinhold Niebuhr

I. The Roots of Niebuhr's Thought

In our analysis of the role of preunderstanding in historical interpretations of the Christian faith we have been conscious of both the negative and positive contributions which preunderstanding may make to the interpretation. We have observed the positive factor at work in terms of the place which the preunderstanding of faith has in the interpretation of the Christian revelation.[1] We have also been concerned to show the negative influence of preunderstanding in those cases where it has obviously distorted the interpretation. In reference to the negative influence, we have maintained that the best corrective to such distortion is an adequate historical methodology. Historical methodology serves the vital twofold function of filtering out the negative features of the interpreter's preunderstanding while at the same time supplying him with the tools to "get at" the evidence of historical revelation. We have noted that the historical method is necessary, even when faith is present, to prevent distortion of the distinctly historical dimension of God's self-disclosure in Christ. Thus we have stressed with equal emphasis the necessity of the posture of faith and an

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[1] See above, ch. 5.

adequate historical method. For without faith the interpreter will inevitably impose a world view onto the Christ-event which by its very nature cannot do justice to it. On the other hand, without the employment of the historical method, there is no factual check on faith. Both are necessary and constitute the minimum requirements in an interpretive approach to the Christian faith.

Another aspect of our argument has been that the given to be interpreted prescribes in large measure the preunderstanding with which it can be properly apprehended. With the Christ-event we have maintained that the necessary informational, attitudinal and ideological elements for the required preunderstanding are supplied by faith and that the necessary methodological element, in that the appearance of Jesus Christ is an event in time, is historical. We have used these two criteria, faith and history, in judging the adeqquacy of the various interpretations which have been considered. Our present concern is to discuss one final historical interpretation of the Christian faith in light of these two criteria, after which we will turn our attention to selected and representative interpretations of the biblical data.[2]

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[2] In the various historical interpretations which have been treated, an attempt has been made to be representative, choosing men whose time in history, whose point of view and whose reason for writing have differed widely, and who speak for a large segment of opinion in their historical era. Some of the more obvious omissions from the main stream of Western thought we will include in Section III.

In Reinhold Niebuhr we find a thinker who unites faith and history in a persuasive way, and who combines many of the best insights of the men who have been examined so far. He is concerned, as was Augustine, to find the answer to the riddles of history in the biblical historical events with their culmination in Christ. He shares with Gibbon the desire to treat all history, including so-called sacred history, by the historical method. He is sympathetic to Hegel's objective to find meaning for the whole of world history. He would agree with Harnack that the Christian message must speak with relevancy and force to each generation and therefore needs interpretation in light of the modern mood. And he unites with Brunner in an enlightened approach to biblical theology which gives him the categories for understanding the historical dimension of the Christian faith.

Of course as a Christian theologian, Niebuhr writes from within faith. Faith is both the ideological and attitudinal framework out of which he interprets history. But, as we have maintained, a man's faith is given specific content and direction by the context in which he finds himself. Therefore, if we are to understand Niebuhr's preunderstanding and its influence on his interpretation of the Christian faith, we must look at those factors which supply his faith with its dominant motifs. A brief account of his life and activities will give us some indication of what those factors are.

Niebuhr was born in Wright City, Missouri in 1892, the

eldest of three children.[3] His father was a pastor with Harnackian sympathies in an Evangelical Church (later the Evangelical and Reformed), a small denomination which traces its ancestry back to the German Prussian Union which was made up of Lutheran and Reformed groups. Niebuhr speaks warmly of both his parents but attributes to his father in particular a formative influence and describes him as one "who combined a vital personal piety with a complete freedom in his theological studies."[4]

Niebuhr attended the educational institutions of his denomination, Elmhurst College and Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis. He then went on to Yale Divinity School where he received his B.D. degree in 1914 and an M.A. degree in 1915. Yale Divinity School at that time was characterized by theological liberalism and social optimism, and Niebuhr left seminary filled with the convictions of a liberal theology which believed in the goodness of God and man, the desirability of applying the Sermon on the Mount to the whole of life and the optimistic hope that the Kingdom of God could be built on earth in the not too distant future.

Family needs resulting from his father's death and "boredom with epistemology"[5] prompted him to leave graduate

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[3] A good biography of Niebuhr is June Bingham, The Courage to Change, New York, 1961; see also D.R. Davies, Reinhold Niebuhr: The Prophet from America, New York, 1948. For his theology see Hans Hofmann, The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, tr. by Louise Pettibone Smith, New York, 1956.

[4] Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds., Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought, New York, 1956, p. 3.

[5] Ibid., p. 4.

study and the academic career to which it pointed and assume the responsibility for a small parish in Detroit. There Niebuhr was able to observe at firsthand the problems of the worker in the automobile industry, something of the tactics used to suppress union organization and the tragic cost in human values which America was paying for its rapid industrialization. During the thirteen years of Niebuhr's pastorate, Detroit grew from a city of 500,000 to 1,500,000 and a good part of this growth can be attributed to the expansion of industry. The resulting social problems, Niebuhr began to realize, could not be as easily solved as his theology had led him to believe. He began to re-evaluate his liberal and moralistic creed which he had accepted as tantamount to the Christian faith. In a diary which he kept during these years he recorded some of his impressions:

> We went through one of the automobile factories today. So artificial is life that these factories are like a strange world to me though I have lived close to them for many years. The foundry interested me particularly. The heat was terrific. The men seemed weary. Here manual labor is a drudgery and toil is slavery. The men cannot possibly find any satisfaction in their work. They simply work to make a living. Their sweat and their dull pain are part of the price paid for the fine cars we all run. And most of us run the cars without knowing the price that is being paid for them.[6]

The experiences of the Detroit years, he remarks, "determined my development more than any books I may have read."[7] In

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6 Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, New York, 1960, p. 99.

7 Kegley, ed., Reinhold Niebuhr, p. 5.

an article which appeared in 1939, looking back on his time as a pastor in Detroit, he wrote "that such theological convictions which I hold today began to dawn upon me during the end of a pastorate in a great industrial city. They dawned upon me because the simple little homilies which were preached in that as in other cities...seemed completely irrelevant to the brutal facts of life in a great industrial center...."[8]

In addition to the disillusionment created by his observation of the impotency of his theology to meet the needs of an expanding industrial community, Niebuhr also saw his liberal optimism fail to supply satisfying explanations for a tragic world war. A trip to Europe during the war's latter stages gave him an opportunity to view its harsh realities. This perspective helped to free him from a too easy acceptance of the naive slogan that the war was fought "to make the world safe for democracy." Later (1923) he wrote: "Gradually the whole horrible truth about the war is being revealed. Every new book destroys some further illusion." He laments that "all human sin seems so much worse in its consequences than in its intentions."[9]

The parish ministry also made its contribution to the break up of Niebuhr's liberal point of view. He was impressed with the inadequacy of the "simple idealism into which the

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[8] "Ten Years That Shook My World", The Christian Century, Vol. LVI/1, No. 17 (April 26, 1939), 545.

[9] Leaves, pp. 61-62.

classical faith had evaporated" to aid in the crises of personal life. Commenting on his pastoral experience of observing the gradual death of a Christian woman with cancer he says: "I relearned the essentials of the Christian faith at the bedside of that nice old soul."[10]

Niebuhr left Detroit in 1928 to become Professor of Christian Ethics and Philosophy of Religion at Union Theological Seminary in New York, a position which he held until his health forced him into semi-retirement in the late 1950's. In addition to his teaching at Union, he was active in an incredible number of activities. In his earlier years he was involved in a pacifist organization, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, but later gave up his pacifist convictions. His work as a leader in the ecumenical movement is well known. He has also found time to run for public office on the Socialist ticket, participate in the policy making and running of the New York Liberal Party and serve as an adviser to President Roosevelt during the New Deal years. He helped found Americans for Democratic Action and worked faithfully in the Zionist cause. Besides the writing of his many books and articles[11] he has edited two religious journals, served on the editorial staff of many magazines and lectured tirelessly in many universities and theological seminaries.

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[10] Kegley, ed., Reinhold Niebuhr, p. 6.

[11] For a bibliography of Niebuhr's writing through 1955 see D.B. Robertson, Reinhold Niebuhr's Works: A Bibliography, Berea, Kentucky, 1955.

Essentially Niebuhr's preunderstanding grew out of the turbulent life which he lived and his efforts to apply Christianity to the social, economic and political spheres. He has on several occasions rejected the appellation of theologian and has maintained "that the gradual unfolding of my theological ideas has come not so much through study as through the pressure of world events."[12] Niebuhr, as we have seen, first began to structure his thought in reaction to the nineteenth century liberal world view which had informed American Christianity.[13] By degrees it became clear to him that the foundations of economic and theological liberalism were extremely weak. The "social gospel" was of more concern to the theologian than to the worker. Much was discussed, but little was accomplished in concrete action. He perceived the cause of the failure of liberal theology to lie in its anthropology which lacked understanding of the egotistic character of human existence.[14] The social gospel's faith in human perfectibility did not take into account the deeply rooted power of sin in human nature. Liberalism, according to Niebuhr, was superficial and sentimental.

In addition to his campaign against liberalism, Niebuhr conducted a second front against orthodoxy, though his thinking has gradually moved toward some of its emphases. The basic fault of liberalism was its naive optimism and

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12 "Ten Years That Shook My World", p. 545.
13 D.R. Davies, op. cit., p. 7.
14 The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I, p. 178.

sentimentality; the lack of power in orthodoxy was due to its pessimism, its theological rigidity and its ethical moralism. Niebuhr writes that "Orthodox Christianity, with insights and perspectives in many ways superior to those of liberalism, cannot come to the aid of modern man, partly because its religious truths are still imbedded in an outmoded science and partly because its morality is expressed in dogmatic and authoritarian moral codes."[15]

Finally, Niebuhr's thought grew in response to his contact with Marxism. One of his earliest books published in 1932, Moral Man and Immoral Society, reflects this Marxian influence. In it Niebuhr shows an appreciation for Marx's ideal of equality and his honest disclosure of social injustice. But Marxism also failed to provide Niebuhr with a framework for his thought because of its unjustified cynicism, doctrinaire economic determinism and naturalism. In reference to this latter point he describes Marxism as "naturalistic as modern liberalism. It is therefore deficient in an ultimate perspective upon historic and relative moral achievements."[16]

The product of his contact with theological liberalism, orthodoxy and Marxism was a "realistic" theology, a position which attempted to preserve the concern for social justice as contained in liberalism and the realism of orthodoxy and Marxism while rejecting naive optimism, pessimism and cynicism.[17]

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15 An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, New York, 1959, p. 14.

16 Ibid., p. 25.

17 For an examination of these three movements on Niebuhr's thought see G. Brillenburg Wurth, Niebuhr, tr. by David Freeman, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1960.

But before consideration can be given to his theology and its implications for his view of history, we must first look at some of the specifically intellectual roots of Niebuhr's thought, for they too, in addition to his more immediate circumstances, contribute to the preunderstanding which he brings to his historical interpretation of the Christian faith.

The historical roots of Niebuhr's preunderstanding are widespread; indeed they include the whole tradition of Western civilization. Yet there are some more specific roots which may be isolated.[18] Perhaps the supreme influence on Niebuhr's preunderstanding comes from the Bible. In particular, his understanding of history is built on the biblical affirmation that God has disclosed Himself in His mighty acts and centrally in His Son Jesus Christ. It is the Bible which supplies the content and categories for Niebuhr's thought and guides him in its application to modern life.

A second force in the formation of Niebuhr's preunderstanding is the American tradition of pragmatism, individualism and freedom.[19] He is the grateful heir of William James and John Dewey. Niebuhr takes the fundamental concepts of pragmatism and gives them depth by placing them within the framework of Christian faith. While rejecting James' idolatry of the human will and Dewey's idolatry of human intelligence, Niebuhr

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18 I have been helped at this point by Richard Kroner's article, "The Historical Roots of Niebuhr's Thought" in Kegley, ed., Reinhold Niebuhr, pp. 178-191.

19 Kegley, ed., Reinhold Niebuhr, pp. 308-9. Kroner strangely omits this factor in his article.

asserts that Christian faith must work in practice and meet the needs of contemporary society. Niebuhr also reflects the heritage of pragmatism in his non-theological writing. He shares with other pragmatists such as H.L. Mencken, Walter Lippmann and Lewis Mumford the role of the prophet in the critical interpretation of his age and the debunking of artificial sentimentalities.

A third influence on Niebuhr's preunderstanding is the theological tradition which has given primacy to personal, existential and subjective categories. He finds common ground with Blaise Pascal who stressed the contradictory nature of human selfhood and who laid bare the limits of human knowledge. He is indebted to Søren Kierkegaard who, Niebuhr thinks, interpreted the human self "more accurately than any modern, and possibly than any previous, Christian theologian."[20] From Kierkegaard Niebuhr learned how to avoid a speculative rationalism without being trapped by an obscurantist fundamentalism, and borrowed the concept of the dialectical relationship between time and eternity. In the work of the Spanish Catholic existentialist, Unamuno, Niebuhr discovered the sense of the tragic in human history and in Nicholas Berdyaev, the Russian philosopher, he uncovered justification for an emphasis on the mysterious and dramatic in human existence. In the thought of Martin Buber he came upon the personal dimension

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[20] The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I, p. iii.

of reality, and in the writings of Emil Brunner he was made aware of a doctrine of man which did justice to both human experience and biblical teaching. Influenced as he was by this tradition, Niebuhr's own theological categories tend to be biblical, personal, dramatic and historical.

Finally, Niebuhr is influenced by the church's great theologians. In Augustine Niebuhr finds a doctrine of man, a philosophy of state and theology of history which are as relevant to his generation as they were to the tasks and necessities arising out of Augustine's situation.[21] In reference to Augustine Niebuhr says that "the thought of this theologian was to answer so many of my questions and to emancipate me finally from the notion that the Christian faith was in some way identical with the moral idealism of the past century."[22] Niebuhr is also a student of the Reformation. Concerning this point Richard Kroner writes: "The dependence upon Reformation theology is evident in every book and every line Niebuhr has written."[23] Niebuhr identifies with that element in Luther which is mystical and dialectical and which challenges the easy answers of rationalism. From Calvin Niebuhr senses both the necessity and the inherent dangers of applying Christian principles to political and social contexts.

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[21] See Niebuhr's Christian Realism and Political Problems, London, 1954, pp. 114-139.

[22] Kegley, ed., Reinhold Niebuhr, p. 9.

[23] Ibid., p. 186.

Thus we find Niebuhr's preunderstanding being formed by his education and pastoral experience, his reflective reactions and criticisms of current ideological options and his wide reading in the thought of Western civilization and Christian theology. This wide range of influencing factors on Niebuhr's preunderstanding does not easily fit any simple scheme of classification. Ideological, attitudinal and methodological elements are difficult to separate. However we would suggest the following scheme as a working hypothesis.

Ideologically, Niebuhr is indebted to two quite distinct groups of influence, secular social theorists and Christian thought. On the one hand are the dominant notes of Marxism and pragmatism and on the other the obvious influence of such thinkers as Augustine, Calvin and Kierkegaard. Niebuhr borrows ideological assumptions freely from both groups, and manages to hold them in balance, i.e. in a dependency relationship. These assumptions do not always function consciously in his views, but there is an overall consistency and rationality about them. Because they do not really converge into a systematically formulated world view they are less than comprehensive in scope and allow Niebuhr to be open to new ideas and evidence.

The main attitudinal components of Niebuhr's preunderstanding stem primarily from his active involvement as a Christian in his social milieu. There is for example a strong element of reaction in his attitudes (to "sentimental" liberalism, "cold" orthodoxy etc.). There is compassion

in his reading of history stemming no doubt from his experience in Detroit. There is a general openness to any and all strands of thought which shed light on man's social condition. This complex of attitudes is a major positive influence on his interpretation.

Niebuhr has few consciously formulated methodological assumptions. He accepts the historical critical method in reference to the biblical documents but has no clearly defined theological approach in the sense of many of his contemporaries.

There is more that could be done by way of defining and categorizing Niebuhr's preunderstanding, but perhaps the best way to see the influence of his preunderstanding on his historical interpretation of the Christian faith is to turn to his interpretation itself. This will enable us to illustrate (~~by way of specifics~~) the role which his preunderstanding does play in his view.

II. Niebuhr's View of History

Niebuhr's understanding of history (i.e. the presuppositions with which he interprets history) grew in response to his conviction that nineteenth century liberal views of the inevitability of progress in history failed to do justice to the realities of modern life. He addressed himself to what he considered to be the arrogant presumption of nineteenth century system-makers that there can be a worldly resolution to the problems of human history. Niebuhr asserts in contrast

that the goal and purpose of history lies beyond our terrestrial sphere, and that the clue to the enigma of man's historical existence is to be found in the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ.

Niebuhr's views are set down in systematic form in his chief work The Nature and Destiny of Man (1946) and Faith and History (1949). An elaboration of the essential themes contained in these volumes is to be found in Beyond Tragedy (1937) and Discerning the Signs of the Times (1946). Many of his other volumes, particularly Reflections on the End of an Era (1934), The Irony of American History (1952) and The Self and and the Dramas of History (1956) include applications and indirect references to his central theme.[24] Our discussion of Niebuhr's interpretation of history will include a brief statement of the ideologies over against which Niebuhr sets his thought, an examination of the focus point (the revelatory event) and the propositions which support it, and finally an explanation of some of the categories Niebuhr employs in his description of the historical process.

To begin with, Niebuhr places his view in reference to the three major formulations of the nature of history which have occurred in Western thought.[25] First, he distinguishes the approach of Greek classicism which tended to identify

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[24] Ibid., p. 292. The article "Reinhold Niebuhr's Philosophy of History", pp. 292-310, written by Robert E. Fitch, is excellently done and I make use of some of his material.

[25] Faith and History, pp. 15-16.

history with the world of nature and which sought the emancipation of man's reason from the world of flux. This approach Niebuhr criticizes as being essentially a-historical. It is altogether too dependent upon the natural order and explains historical causation in terms of the occurrences in nature or of tragic fate.

A more formidable opponent is the modern view of history which regards the historical development of man's power and freedom as the solution for every human perplexity and evil. Modern man, Niebuhr argues, believes that historical development is a redemptive process. He writes that "the dominant note in modern culture is not so much confidence in reason as faith in history."[26] Modern man holds the conviction that historical progress can gradually change the human situation. Such a conviction, Niebuhr believes, contains two very dubious propositions which are responsible for the errors and illusions in the modern view: (1) the idea of the perfectibility of man and (2) the idea of progress.[27] The modern approach to the understanding of history fails, according to Niebuhr, because neither of these two articles can be justified. The first proposition does not sufficiently take into account the complexity of man's nature, and ascribes to him a type of freedom which he does not possess. To Niebuhr, man is and does participate by virtue of his self-transcendence in the

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26 Ibid., p. 3.
27 Christian Realism and Political Problems, p. 13.

creation of history, but he is also limited by the temporal process and tainted by sin which makes his perfectibility impossible. Niebuhr refutes the second proposition in a manner similar to Johnson's rebuttal of Berkeley. The modern view stubs its toe on the rock of the brutal facts of history. "Since 1914", writes Niebuhr, "one tragic experience has followed another, as if history had been designed to refute the vain delusion of modern man."[28] And, unfortunately, modern man's explanations of the catastrophes of our time are derived from principles of interpretation which were responsible for his inability to anticipate the experiences which he now seeks to comprehend.

A more adequate understanding of the nature of history, Niebuhr believes, is to be found in the biblical-Christian approach which understands man's historic existence as both meaningful and mysterious, and which regards the freedom of man, which distinguishes history from nature, as the source of evil as well as good. In the revelation of God in Christ, faith discerns God's redemptive purpose as both the fulfillment and negation of all partial meanings in history as they are "embodied" in national, imperial and world-wide cultural destinies.[29]

The validation of the Christian view of history, according to Niebuhr, is ultimately by faith and not by rational

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28 Faith and History, p. 7.

29 Ibid., p. 120.

analysis; yet there is a limited validation which can be demonstrated.[30] This apologetic task Niebuhr conceives as having both a negative and positive side. The negative side, as we have already implied, consists in demonstrating that all worldly wisdom, whether optimistic or pessimistic, emphasizing either the dignity or the misery of man, gives an inadequate view of the total human situation. The positive aspect of the demonstration consists in correlating the truth apprehended by faith to the truths gained about life in human experience and through scientific and philosophical disciplines.

The focus point of history, that which gives the whole stream of events coherence and meaning, is the revelatory event of Jesus Christ. "The Christian faith begins with, and is founded upon, the affirmation that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ represent an event in history, in and through which a disclosure of the whole meaning of history occurs...."[31] The true meaning of history can never be discerned inside the flux of time for man will inevitably construct a realm of meaning from a particular standpoint within that flux.[32] He will impose upon history a meaning which is itself historically conditioned. God reveals the purpose of history from beyond by dramatically breaking into time in the central and culminating act in Heilsgeschichte.[33]

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30 Ibid., p. 171.
31 Ibid., p. 29.
32 Christian Realism and Political Problems, p. 187.
33 Ibid., p. 188.

The meaning supplied by God in the revelatory event is twofold. Positively, it is an assertion that God has taken action to overcome the variance which exists between man and God.[34] It is the demonstration of God's wisdom and truth, and grace and power which can overcome sin, complete what man cannot of himself complete and provide new resources for human life. God Himself in His Son has become a historical person to rescue men. God has broken into our finiteness from His eternity and sought us out. In Christ, the meaning of man's historic existence is fulfilled. In Christ, the divine sovereignty is "revealed to have an ultimate resource of mercy and forgiveness, beyond judgment, which completes history despite the continued fragmentary and contradictory character of all historic reality."[35] Niebuhr writes:

> Christian faith regards the revelation in Christ as final because the ultimate problem [sin] is solved by the assurance that God takes man's sin upon Himself and into Himself and that without this divine initiative and this divine sacrifice there could be no reconciliation and no easing of man's uneasy conscience. This revelation is final not only as a category of interpreting the total meaning of history but also as a solution for the problem of the uneasy conscience in each individual.[36]

On the negative side, this revelatory event stands as a judgment upon all the idolatrous centers of meaning before

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[34] Kegley, ed., Reinhold Niebuhr, p. 19.

[35] Faith and History, p. 157.

[36] The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I, p. 143.

which we worship.[37] It functions as a perspective from which to view the pretensions of man's pride as he constructs absolutes out of the relativities of his culture. In short, from the standpoint of Christian faith, the life and death of Christ become the revelation of God's character as both Redeemer and Judge whose mercy and forgiveness triumph over the vicissitudes and ambiguities of man's historical existence.

Niebuhr employs three major propositions in building a structure around his foundational point that the meaning of history has been disclosed in the Christ-event.[38] The first proposition is that the unity of history is perceived by faith in the sovereignty of God and not by "sight" of historical processes. Here the influence of Augustine is clearly in evidence. Niebuhr does not attempt to build an over-all structure to history as has been done for example by Hegel, Marx, Spengler and Toynbee. Such inner unity cannot be elaborated by reason because history displays chaos as well as order. Faith alone is able to perceive coherence in the flux of events as it grasps the meaning of "a suffering divine love."[39] In the revelatory event "faith discerns the self-disclosure of God."[40] Niebuhr is careful to acknowledge that "the dramas of history contain many facts and sequences which must be rationally correlated. But the frame of meaning in

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37 Faith and History, ch. VII.
38 Kegley, ed., Reinhold Niebuhr, pp. 293-4.
39 Christian Realism and Political Problems, p. 184.
40 The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I, p. 136.

which these facts and sequences are discerned must be apprehended by faith because it touches the realm of mystery beyond rational comprehension."[41] That realm of mystery which faith discerns via the revelatory event and places its confidence in is the sovereignty of God. God is the actuating force in history, and "history is conceived as unity because all historical destinies are under the dominion of a single divine sovereignty."[42] Niebuhr justifies this claim to find meaning by faith in God's sovereignty over history by pointing out that any attempts to ascertain the meaning of history are introduced by faith, and that the only legitimate resting place for faith is the Eternal God who supplies history's meaning from beyond history rather than in the midst of its relativities.[43]

A second supporting proposition of Niebuhr's central thesis is his affirmation of the permanent character of sin and evil in history.[44] Again Augustine's influence is present. History itself is not redemptive; it cannot be its own Christ. No amount of progress will be able to squeeze out sin, nor can man ever be master of his own historical destiny. The reason standing behind this assertion of Niebuhr's is to be found in his understanding of the nature of man. Man is a

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[41] The Self and the Dramas of History, London, 1956, p. 260.

[42] Faith and History, p. 120.

[43] The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I, p. 151.

[44] Faith and History, ch. VIII.

free being able to participate creatively in the making of history. The self's memory of the past and its capacities to project goals transcending the necessities of nature enable it to create the level of reality which we know as human history.[45] Therefore a radical distinction must be made between the natural world and the world of human history. The justification for such a distinction lies in the unique character of human freedom. Yet man with all his freedom is still imprisoned by sin and finitude. In fact it is the misuse of this very freedom which causes man to sin. Niebuhr describes the process in the following way:

> Moral or historical evil is the consequence of man's abortive effort to overcome his insecurity by his own power, to hide the finiteness of his intelligence by pretensions of omniscience and to seek for emancipation from his ambiguous position by his own resources. Sin is, in short, the consequences of man's inclination to usurp the prerogatives of God, to think more highly of himself than he ought to think, thus making destructive use of his freedom by not observing the limits to which a creaturely freedom is bound.[46]

The sin of pride causes man to attribute to himself and his institutions an importance and permanence which is not justified. God's revelation in Christ offering grace and mercy supplies both the vantage point from which to judge such arrogance on the part of man and the resources of love to overcome man's rebellion and his evil inclination of self-

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45 The Self and the Dramas of History, p. 53.

46 Faith and History, p. 137.

worship.[47] "Ultimately, therefore," writes Niebuhr, "only the divine forgiveness toward all men can overcome the confusion of human history and make this whole drama meaningful."[48]

A third and final proposition which expands Niebuhr's conviction that the Christ-event is that event which gives meaning to all events is that history provides a disclosure of meaning but not a fulfillment of meaning. Niebuhr seeks a mediating point between the classical view which denies all meaning to the temporal and desires to escape to the eternal and the modern view which expects total fulfillment in history. In one of Niebuhr's favorite expressions, "Man is a Moses" who has glimpsed the promised land from afar, but cannot enter in.[49] There is nothing inherent in history which will complete it. Man may make some progress in his culture and institutions, but in them he finds no <u>telos</u> or true end. Rather he finds <u>finis</u>, i.e. an abrupt termination of his career in this world. The eschatological symbols of the New Testament, the return of Christ, the Last Judgment and the resurrection, give man the assurance of a <u>telos</u> beyond history.[50]

The mention of symbol moves the discussion to a consideration of some of the categories which Niebuhr uses in his description of history. Following Robert Fitch we will limit

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47 <u>Ibid</u>., p. 142.

48 <u>Ibid</u>., p. 31.

49 <u>The Nature and Destiny of Man</u>, Vol. II, p. 308.

50 <u>Faith and History</u>, p. 269.

our inquiry to four: (1) symbol and myth, (2) paradox, (3) the Marxian dialectic and (4) irony.[51]

Niebuhr employs the concepts of symbol and myth partly because of his desire to be true to both the message of the Bible and the facts of history, but more importantly because of his belief in the Kierkegaardian dictum that there is "an infinite qualitative difference between time and eternity." Eternity is the realm of the absolute and history is the realm of the relative. Therefore anything in history is by definition relative and can be no more than a pointer to the eternal. It is both foolish and dangerous to identify anything in history with the eternal. The symbol, then, is a link between time and eternity and cannot be identified with either.[52] Care should be taken neither to interpret the symbol literally nor to treat it as unimportant for "if the symbol is taken literally the dialectical conception of time and eternity is falsified and the ultimate vindication of God over history is reduced to a point in history.... On the other hand, if the symbol is dismissed as unimportant, as merely a picturesque or primitive way of apprehending the relation of the historical to the eternal, the Biblical dialectic is obscured in another direction."[53]

Symbols are the rallying points for religious myths which are attempts to discover depth in history and to explain

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51 Kegley, ed., Reinhold Niebuhr, pp. 292 ff.

52 Edward J. Carnell, The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1960, p. 111.

53 The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. II, p. 289.

the collective insights of man's interaction with eternity. The religious myth deals with the mystery and depth of life which elude all efforts to catch them in neat rational descriptions. Inevitably there is a note of deception, a necessity of picturing things as they seem rather than as they are, in order to record on one dimension what exists in two dimensions.[54] The biblical doctrines of the Creation, the Fall, the Incarnation, the Atonement and the Consummation all have an element of the mythological in them.

Niebuhr is also fond of speaking of the nature of history and historical events in terms of paradox. Two examples from the heart of his theology will illustrate this point. First, man is limited by sin and finitude and yet is a self-transcendent being. As a result he is at the same time both a product and a creator of history. A second illustration is Niebuhr's time/eternity dialectic which is central to his description of the Incarnation. The idea of eternity entering time, Niebuhr affirms, is intellectually absurd; "that the Word was made flesh outrages all the cannons by which truth is usually judged. Yet it is the truth."[55] The whole character of the Christian religion is involved in the affirmation of this paradox.

A third category which Niebuhr utilizes in his description of history, particularly in his earlier writings, is the

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54 Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, New York, 1937, p. 5.

55 Ibid., p. 14.

Marxian dialectic. He never accepts the Marxian position without qualification, but does explore in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) and *Reflections on the End of An Era* (1934) the influence of class conflict and the inevitable use of force and power in all collective institutions. In these volumes he applies Marxist insights to the rapidly expanding American industrial society. He was especially conscious of the fact that the American capitalistic system was completely filled with social injustice and largely accepted a Marxian analysis of it. His primary concern was with social justice, and while he rejected the more radical Marxian solutions, he saw no way to escape class conflicts in the achievement of a just society.

A final category which Niebuhr employs in analyzing history is irony. He sees in man's situation a continual eruption of the ironic, by which he means that often the intention of an action is far different from the outcome. It is ironic that the instruments which men use to destroy particular vices ultimately take on the nature of the vice. It is ironic that human sin springs from the misuse of man's capacities of power, wisdom and virtue.[56] The ultimate irony is in the biblical history, that Christ is crucified by the priests of the purest religion of his day and by the most sophisticated legal code, the Roman; and that his crucifixion which appears to be a tragic defeat is in fact a final victory.

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[56] Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, New York, 1952, pp. 151 ff.

III. An Appraisal

As with other men we have considered, so with Niebuhr there is much that is positive in his understanding of the historical dimension of the Christian faith. What is particularly important for our theme is the place which Niebuhr gives to the necessity of the preunderstanding of faith for an adequate comprehension of the Christ-event. Niebuhr explicitly states that it is faith alone which is able to discern the transcendent and redemptive meaning in the revelatory event of the Incarnation. Niebuhr writes that "God does disclose his purposes. The disclosure takes place in significant events of history. The revelatory power of these events must be apprehended by faith."[57] Equally important, as this quotation indicates, is Niebuhr's insistence on the historical nature of revelation, that God in Christ has redeemed man and revealed the meaning of all history. Niebuhr rejects all ontological speculation and affirms that the "Word was made flesh" and that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." And, unlike Brunner, he does not remove the revelatory events from historical examination. He erects no false dichotomy between faith and historical science. In discussing this issue he praises the old liberal tradition which maintained that honesty involved not only loyalty to Christian truth "but also fidelity to the standards of the

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[57] Faith and History, p. 119.

whole modern world of culture. This tradition rightly insisted that no facts of history could be exempted from historical scrutiny in the name of faith. Christianity was a historical religion. It rested upon the facts of history as interpreted by faith."[58]

While we are in basic agreement with Niebuhr, there are still some aspects of his thought which appear to be overly influenced by certain aspects of his preunderstanding. This is not so much a question of negative criticism as it is a matter of emphasis. In the first place, does Niebuhr overstress the Augustinian note of human sinfulness? Does the emphasis on the fragmentary and destructive aspect of history (which certainly exists) allow enough room for an appreciation of the positive achievements of human culture? Given world wars, atomic bombs and all the rest, mankind has nevertheless made progress in an amazing number of directions. Niebuhr's "realism" which comes close to being overly negative has caused one author to write: "Niebuhr seems so overwhelmed by the evil imbedded in any manifestation of power, in its idolatrous self-esteem, that he appears to strip the culture itself of all worth."[59] Does not the Christ-event, while revealing the ultimate character of sin, also reveal the ultimate good and supply power for pursuing it? Should not more emphasis be given to the place of God's activity in

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58 Essays in Applied Christianity, ed. by D.B. Robertson, New York, 1960, p. 125.

59 Manuel, op. cit., p. 143.

the lives and affairs of men? Surely faith teaches that God has not forsaken us.

Another question of emphasis and not of basic disagreement which rises to the surface in a close scrutiny of Niebuhr's interpretation of historical revelation is his adherence to the Kierkegaardian dialectic of time and eternity. Because of his acceptance of this principle, Niebuhr necessarily sees the meaning of history as being supplied from "beyond". But many of the valuable insights and principles which Niebuhr allegedly gets from beyond history seem to have really been found in history. Though the Christian revelation may have come from beyond history, it nevertheless occurred in history and is connected with precedent and subsequent history, and functions as a power in history.[60] Maybe history has more meaning and structure than we suppose, especially if we view God as the moving force behind it rather than its occasional visitor.

A final question regarding Niebuhr's formulation is his use of the concept of myth, especially as it relates to the redemptive events. It may have its place as a means of describing the early chapters of Genesis, but seems less appropriate in describing the Incarnation, Atonement and Resurrection. Granted these events point beyond themselves to eternity, but they also have a reference point in history which most "myths", as the word is ordinarily used, do not

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60 Kegley, ed., Reinhold Niebuhr, p. 306.

have. Even symbol, which has a less unfortunate connotation than myth, is problematic. One always wonders if events really happened if they are described in terms of myth or symbol. And of course if the redemptive events lose their facticity, which Niebuhr does not want them to do, the historic revelation is exchanged for theistic philosophy.

SECTION III

PREUNDERSTANDING AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Chapter Twelve

The Allegorical Method: Origen

I. Preliminary Considerations

Our concern in Section I was to define and analyze preunderstanding and to consider its relationship to the general task of interpreting the Christian revelation. In Section II the discussion moved to a consideration of the role of preunderstanding in representative historical interpretations of the Christian faith. Our attention now shifts to an assessment of the role of preunderstanding in representative interpretations of the Bible.

Our emphasis in Section III will be slightly different than in Section II, though inevitably, in our treatment of the various historical interpretations of the Christian faith, some attention was paid to the way in which the six representative authors made use of the biblical record. Yet in general the views discussed dealt primarily with the broad scope of history and the place which Christianity has in it, or the meaning which the Christian revelation gives to it. But in this section the emphasis will be placed on the biblical documents themselves and how they have been interpreted and should be interpreted in light of the ever

present factor of preunderstanding. So our specific purpose in this section is to analyze the function of preunderstanding in biblical interpretation. To remind ourselves again of the inevitability of preunderstanding having an influence on the interpreter of the Bible we would do well to quote Karl Barth. He says:

> No one is in a position, objectively or abstractly, merely to observe and present what is there. For how can he do so without at the same time reflecting upon and interpreting what is there? No one copies without making this transition. In affirming and representing what is written, and what is because of what is written, we accompany what is written, and what is because of what is written, with our own thinking.[1]

Our approach in evaluating the role of preunderstanding in biblical interpretation will be similar to that for historical interpretation. We will begin by looking briefly at each interpreter's historical situation in an effort to uncover the factors which contribute to the formation and content of his preunderstanding. Next we will analyze his preunderstanding in terms of its type and function. We will then be in a position to explore how the interpreter's preunderstanding influences his view and interpretation of the Bible. Finally, we will utilize both the concepts of history and faith as we have defined and developed them[2] as a means of judging the adequacy of the six hermeneutical positions which will be discussed.

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[1] Church Dogmatics, Vol. I/2, p. 727.

[2] See above, chs. 1 & 4.

It should be remembered that our emphasis will be upon that aspect of the interpreter's preunderstanding which influences his interpretation of the Bible, not the totality of his preunderstanding. In general our pattern will be first to state the broad assumptions which provide the foundation for the hermeneutical system and then to examine how these assumptions become manifest in the specific presuppostions of the interpretive method. The first biblical interpreter to be considered is the brilliant Alexandrian teacher of the third century, Origen, whose genius was devoted primarily to the development of an adequate view of biblical hermeneutics for his time.

II. The Formation of Origen's Preunderstanding

Origen's preunderstanding was shaped in the first fifty years of the third century, an era in which there was a potent ferment of ideas and a bitter contest between opposing ideologies. Assorted syncretistic religious cults which had their origins in Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Syria and Asia Minor were blossoming throughout the Roman Empire. For the sophisticated, philosophy was readily available. The Stoics were actively philosophizing, as were Plutarch and his followers, each spreading the influence and popularity of philosophical thought. Of special significance was the rise of the various gnostic sects under the leadership of such men as Basilides and his son Isidorus, and Valentinus and his disciples Ptolemaeus and Heracleon. The gnostics dealt with the religious subjects

of God and providence, man and his nature, the origin and destiny of the cosmos, Christology and redemption. As the gnostic sects seceded from the church, their exegesis became more speculative and they incorporated various expiatory rites, recipes for salvation and some asceticism from the syncretistic religions. The church too had its spokesmen who were brimming over with ideas. Apologists such as Aristides, Justin, Tatian and others vigorously defended the faith. Intellectually this era was far from dull as these four streams of thought--syncretistic religion, philosophy, gnosticism and Christianity--sought to win the day for their cause.

The problem with which the era was preoccupied and with which these various groups were all dealing in their own way was essentially a religious one. Yet the framework in which a solution was being sought was classical culture. The result was often a strange merging of new beliefs and religious mysticism with classical values and philosophy.[3] As we will observe, Origen's thought was no exception to this general pattern.

The city of Alexandria was in many ways the center of this ideological ferment. Nearly all of the main currents of thought met and mingled in this cosmopolitan and learned city where schools, libraries and museums were common features of the landscape. There were numerous professorships of

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3 Eugène De Faye, Origen and His Work, tr. by Fred Rothwell, London, 1926, pp. 13-17.

philosophy, rhetoric and literature; the Ptolemies organized regular scientific expeditions; and courses were offered in mathematics, astronomy and geography. In such an intellectual atmosphere there was a large degree of toleration. Adherents of different cults and creeds lived side by side in mutual good will and inevitably absorbed some of each other's points of view. As a consequence, a mutual dependence of Christian and pagan speculation was one of the most pronounced features of the age.[4] In this environment Origen was able to gain an encyclopedic knowledge, but he, like others of his time, assimilated more than one strand of thought into his pre-understanding.

It was in or near Alexandria that Origen was born about 185 A.D.[5] His parents, if not Christian at the time of Origen's birth, were soon afterwards converted and Origen grew up in a Christian family. His father, Leonides, was a man of means and culture and personally supervised Origen's early education which included nearly every branch of Greek learning as well as moral and spiritual subjects and the study of the Bible. Later Origen became a pupil of Clement at the catechetical school of the church of Alexandria.

When he was seventeen his father was arrested and ultimately martyred in the persecution of Severus (A.D. 202).

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[4] William Fairweather, Origen and Greek Patristic Theology, Edinburgh, 1901, p. 2.

[5] Probably the best introduction to Origen's life and thought is Jean Daniélou's Origen, tr. by W. Mitchell, New York, 1955.

Origen felt the impact of this very keenly[6] and wished to follow his father in martyrdom. Fortunately he was prevented from doing so by his mother.

One of the results of the persecution in which Origen's father was martyred was the flight of Clement from Alexandria and the consequent break up of the catechetical school which was under his direction. In a surprised move the bishop, Demetrius, put Origen, who was still a youth of eighteen, in charge. The decision proved a wise one and Origen's course of life as an educator was set. He soon attracted many students not only by his teaching[7] but also by the quality of his life.[8]

Origen's life as an educator may be conveniently divided into two separate parts. The first part, from 203-231, centered in Alexandria where he was an increasing success as a teacher and won pupils from varying persuasions and backgrounds. In the early years Origen himself taught the preparatory courses of dialectics, physics, mathematics, geometry, and astronomy as well as the more advanced courses in Greek philosophy and speculative theology. Later the teaching of the preparatory courses became too heavy a burden and he assigned them to his pupil Heracles. Origen also

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6 Eusebius writes that "when...the flame of persecution was kindled to a fierce blaze, and countless numbers were being wreathed with the crowns of martyrdom, Origen's soul was possessed with such a passion for martyrdom...that he was all eagerness to come to close quarters with danger, and to leap forward and rush into the conflict." Ecclesiastical History, tr. by H.J. Lawlor & J.E.L. Oulton, London, 1927, Vol. I, vi 2.2.

7 Ibid., vi 3.12.

8 Ibid., vi 3.7.

found time, in addition to his teaching, to attend the lectures of Ammonius Saccas, the famous founder of Neo-platonism, and was influenced in his cosmology and psychology as well as in his theological method.[9]

The second part of Origen's teaching career began in 232. After a controversy which resulted in his excommunication by the bishop of Alexandria, Origen was invited to found a new school of theology in Caesarea. This school, over which Origen presided for twenty years, was nearly as successful as the one in Alexandria. The courses of instruction were similar. After a brief philosophical orientation the students proceeded to study logic, natural science, geometry and astronomy, and then for the more advanced, there were courses in ethics and theology. At the outbreak of the Decian persecution (249-251) Origen was arrested and severely tortured. As a result of these tortures, his health was broken and he died in Tyre in 253 A.D.

Throughout his life Origen was a disciplined scholar. In both the quality and quantity of his output he has few peers in the history of the church. Many of his writings have been lost or destroyed due to later controversies which raged over his teaching, but more than enough has been preserved to appreciate the scope and depth of Origen's contribution. Martin Marty writes that "Origen...inspires a gasp of awe for his breadth and depth of thought; he was

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[9] Johannes Quasten, Patrology, Vol. II, The Anti-Nicene Literature after Irenaeus, Utrecht, 1953, p. 38.

a universal genius, a theological Leonardo da Vinci--at home in philosophy, dogma, apology, polemics, exegesis. Though he was later repudiated by some in the East, he is the eastern church's greatest teacher and, more than others, formed the idea patterns in which Christian creedalism grew."[10] With Origen, the church's intellectual life comes of age.

Now, before turning to Origen's hermeneutical position, it is necessary, on the basis of this brief introduction to Origen's life setting, to state explicitly the essential features of his preunderstanding, and particularly that aspect of his preunderstanding which plays a prominent part in his interpretation of Scripture.

At the center of Origen's preunderstanding was his deeply rooted Christian faith. Faith in the God of the biblical witness was the comprehensive world view with which he approached the Bible. But Origen's faith, like that of most Christians in nearly every era of history, was given its specific content by the environment of which he was a part. It is this specific content as it informs his interpretive method with which we are primarily concerned. It contains ideological, attitudinal and methodological components.

Part of the ideological element in Origen's preunderstanding in regard to the Bible was supplied by the tradition

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[10] A Short History of Christianity, New York, 1965, p. 87.

of the church. Implicit for the man of faith in Origen's time was the acceptance of certain beliefs about the nature of the Bible. These beliefs--that Scripture is inspired, that it is a unity, that it was given for a definite purpose and that it should be interpreted allegorically--which Origen accepted as essential in the unified web of belief for the Christian, were not to be questioned because they were handed down from the apostles themselves.[11] Origen, as a loyal churchman, assumes them as part of his hermeneutical system. Thus much of what Origen says about the Bible may be understood as an attempt to produce a more coherent and self-consistent version of the teaching put forward by Christian writers of an earlier generation.[12] Origen is particularly indebted to the Greek apologist, Ireneaus, and his catechetical teacher, Clement. From these two men Origen borrows these fundamental ideological assumptions about the Bible. And it is this set of assumptions, which we will discuss in a moment, that constitutes the major influence on his interpretation of the Bible and functions consistently and consciously throughout it.

Yet these assumptions do not function in a vacuum in Origen's thought. They are rather dependent upon a wider philosophical idiom, that of later Platonism, which is also an integral part of the ideological composition of

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11 Origen, On First Principles, tr. by G.W. Butterworth, London, 1936, Preface, 2.

12 Richard A. Morris, God and World in Early Christian Theology, New York, 1965, p. 13.

Origen's preunderstanding.[13] Origen was an excellent student of Greek philosophy and he is indebted to it for his understanding of the nature of the religious question.[14] The fundamental problem was the soul's attainment of a certain level of knowledge which transforms it into the likeness of God. Origen accepts this emphasis but recasts the logic of Platonism (which saw the soul's ultimate return to its divine source as dependent upon its own discovery of God) by postulating that the soul's spiritual progress depends upon God's revelation of Himself,[15] a revelation which is contained in Scripture. This position determines Origen's estimate of Greek thought for which he had great respect as a tool to be used for the explication of the Christian revelation, but towards which he was not uncritical since it had failed to make the knowledge of God available to ordinary people. Greek philosophical thought, he believed, was guilty of tolerating heathenism, had no power to convert souls and had little meaning for any except the intellectually elite. Yet this basic Platonic assumption, while functioning somewhat less consistently and consciously in his interpretation of the Bible than the assumptions which he accepted from his ecclesiastical forebears, nevertheless constitutes a major

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13 Adolph Harnack, History of Dogma, Vol. II, p. 338.

14 See Charles Bigg, The Christian Platonists of Alexandria, London, 1913, pp. 321-352.

15 Norris, op. cit., pp. 132 ff.

influence on it. In fact no other Christian before him, not even Justin Martyr, had been in so close a brush with the philosophical schools as Origen was with the Platonists of Alexandria.

The attitudes which Origen brings to his interpretation of Scripture are essentially what one would expect of a Christian theologian of his stature. As one who stands within faith, he is open and receptive to the Bible's message concerning God's self-disclosure in Christ. As a scholar, he is careful, thorough and honestly critical of that which does not seem convincing. As a loyal churchman, he is respectful of the traditions of biblical interpretation which were commonly accepted by the church of his time. All of these attitudes are operative in Origen's interpretation of Scripture.

The main methodological ingredient in Origen's preunderstanding as it relates to his interpretation of the Bible is provided, as we have suggested, by the tradition of biblical interpretation which preceeded him in its origin, but which was still current in its most salient features in his time.[16] In the earliest decades of the church the only written authority which could be called Scripture was the Old Testament. But the Christians had inherited from Judaism the concept that God's will is expressed in a written word, and soon the documents describing the sayings and deeds of Jesus (the Gospels) began to carry the weight of authoritative Scripture. This inevitably

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[16] Robert M. Grant, A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible, London, 1965, pp. 42 ff.

raised the question of the relationship between the Old Testament and these new documents. By the second century the church was full of a variety of ideas in regard to this relationship. Barnabas believed that the Old Testament had meaning as it was understood in terms of the Gospels, and his exegetical method was characterized by typology designed to extrapolate from the Old Testament the essential truth of the gospel. For him, history had little meaning: God's covenant had always been made with the Christians and thus there could be no analysis of the relation between old and new covenents. Marcion took the extreme view of rejecting the Old Testament completely. His view was justifiable only if viewed from within his own distinctive theology which posited the existence of two Gods, the just God of the Jews and the benevolent God of the New Testament (or parts of it) who is the Father of Jesus Christ. Arguing against Marcion was Justin Martyr who held that all of God's witness can be included in the Christian faith and that the only real difference between God's revelation in the Old Testament, Greek philosophy and that in Christ is one of degree. His exegesis of the Old Testament is at once christocentric and historical, allowing the historical reality of God's relationship to Israel, yet insisting that this earlier covenant looks forward to being superseded in Christ. Irenaeus defined even more precisely the relation of the testaments and asserted, also against Marcion, that the same God reveals Himself in both Old and New. The revelation

of God in the law of the Old Testament was real and valid for its day but now God reveals Himself in a new way in Jesus Christ. Both Justin and Irenaeus were able to take biblical history seriously and to set forth the permanent value of the Old Testament. Yet more definitive formulation was needed, and it was to be found in the allegorical tradition of Alexandria.

In biblical studies the father of allegorical method was Philo, an Alexandrian Jew of the first century who desired to reconcile the Bible (the Septuagint version of the Old Testament) with Greek thought. Philo was convinced that the best way to accomplish this goal was to interpret the Bible allegorically. Allegory, sometimes called a prolonged metaphor, is a rhetorical device which represents a sense higher than the literal. It differs from a metaphor in being a veiled presentation, in a figurative story, of a meaning implied but not expressly stated. Philo had two classes of allegorization, the physical and the ethical. The former referred to God and the nature of the world, the latter to the duties of man. Behind the historical or literal sense was a hidden meaning fitting into one of these two classifications. Every word and letter of Scripture had its meaning. The gnostic sects, which flourished in Alexandria, also were great allegorizers and found esoteric meanings behind the obvious sense of the biblical literature. Clement, Origen's teacher, was the first among the Christians to

justify and explain the meaning of the allegorical method. Believing that all Scripture speaks in the mysterious language of symbols he was able to find biblical support for his already formed thought. Yet his method was checked by his insistence that faith in Christ, his person and his work, was the key to understanding Scripture. The Logos which spoke in the Old Testament can be understood in light of the knowledge which Christ has given. The methodological assumptions of allegorical interpretation Origen takes over and advances in his own distinctive way.

III. Origen's Hermeneutical System

We must now consider how these strands of Origen's preunderstanding come to expression in his hermeneutical system. We will do so by examining the four fundamental presuppositions of the system. They are: (1) that the Bible is inspired; (2) that it is a unity; (3) that it was given for a definite purpose; and (4) that it is best interpreted allegorically.

First, loyal to the ecclesiastical tradition of which he was a part, Origen asserts the Bible to be the inspired Word of God and not merely the composition of men. Though Origen has questions about the canonicity of certain New Testament books and attributes to some books (e.g. the Gospel of John) more value than others, generally he extends the concept of inspiration to cover all the biblical books and to every word of each book so that errors are impossible.

He writes:

> We believe that there is no possible way... of bringing to man's knowledge the higher and diviner teaching about the Son of God, except by means of those scriptures which were inspired by the Holy Spirit, namely, the Gospels, and the writings of the apostles, to which we add, according to the declaration of Christ himself, the law and the prophets.[17]

Apparent errors he explains by assuming that two separate events are recorded or by resorting to the allegorical method. In the case of solecisms and grammatical defects he distinguishes between the external word about which the biblical authors were conscious of their liability to err and its contents which are uniformly and absolutely without error. The medium of inspiration is the Holy Spirit who communicates the revelatory message to the author and superintends his writing without nullifying his own choice of words. The evidence for the inspiration of Scripture consists of its acceptance on the part of large groups of people and its consequent power in their lives, fulfilled prophecy, the apostolic activities which bear the authenticating stamp of God's presence and the inner conviction of the reader as he exposes himself to the truth of Scripture.

A second presupposition of Origen's view of the Bible, following logically from the first, is its unity. Over against Marcion and the gnostics, who depreciated the value of the Old Testament and the Jews who argued that the Christians had no title to the Old Testament, Origen asserts with

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[17] <u>On First Principles</u>, I.3.1.

Irenaeus the harmony of both Testaments, of law, prophecy, gospel and epistle. In the Old Testament the truth is hidden, but in the New it comes to light. The Old Testament is illuminated by the New, just as the New only discloses its profundity once it is illuminated by the Old. The bond between the two is determined and maintained by the allegorical method.

Origen, then, accepting the basic assumptions of his theological forebears, understands the Bible as given and inspired by God and as a unified whole. From these two principles it follows that the Scripture contains nothing that is unworthy of God, and that its whole message must therefore be accepted. This leads to a consideration of a third presupposition of Origen's hermeneutic, namely that the purpose of Scripture is the communication of divine truth. According to Origen the primary objective of God in giving men the Scriptures is positive and didactic, i.e. to transmit ineffable mysteries about man, God, the nature of the world, sin and redemption. The Bible is essentially a mine of speculative truth rather than a record of God's redemptive activity in history. In a kind of refocusing of the Platonic ideal of the lover of wisdom, Origen believes that the soul makes progress through rational activity to fellowship with God. The product of such study is theology which is an interior grasp of the divine mysteries and communion with God Himself.[18]

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[18] L.G. Patterson, God and History in Early Christian Thought, London, 1967, p. 48. See also On First Principles, IV, 2.1-3.5.

The obvious implication is that Scripture must be studied as well as read and that the meaning, though plain enough at one level, is in other respects obscure and hidden. Origen stresses the "mysteries" which the inspired books contain but which are not always explicit. Therefore it is necessary to make comparisons of different passages and to use techniques of logical analysis in order to draw out the hidden and spiritual truths. And if the interpreter fails to grasp the full import of a passage he should put the blame on himself. Origen explains that "if sometimes, as you read the Scripture, you stumble over a thought, good in reality yet a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence, lay the blame on yourself." For, he goes on, "there is not one jot or tittle written in Scripture which, for those who know how to use the power of the Scriptures, does not effect its proper work."[19]

There is a secondary objective on God's part in giving us the Scripture in the form He has which is negative in nature. It serves the purpose of concealing the higher truths, under the cover of some narrative of visible things or human deeds or written legislation, from those who are not fit to receive them. The form in which Scripture comes to us protects against the mocking of the heathen from whom the mystery of the King should be veiled. That which is sacred should not be given to the dogs. Moreover the literal sense of

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[19] Origen, Selections from the Commentaries and Homilies, ed. & tr. by R.B. Tollinton, London, 1929, pp. 49-50.

Scripture is sufficient for the salvation and edification of the multitudes who would only be confused with the complexity of the deeper mysteries. For them pistis is enough and gnosis is unnecessary. The highest truth of the inspired text can only be appropriated by one who goes beyond the letter of Scripture to the symbolic meaning. Origen writes that since "the Scriptures were composed through the Spirit of God... they have not only that meaning which is obvious, but also another which is hidden from the majority of readers. For the contents of Scripture are the outward forms of certain mysteries and the images of divine things."[20] An acquisition of the deeper knowledge of Scripture goes beyond the salvation which is available to all men to perfection which is available to only the few.[21]

Thus, according to Origen, the Bible is meaningful in two ways: in its plain sense and as a symbol of higher truths. It is in this way that Origen's Platonism extends to his conception of the character of the Scriptures themselves. The Biblé has an inner meaning which is only partially reflected in its outward and literal sense. As Plato had seen in the harmonious motions of the visible world evidence of an intelligible order which was their counterpart, so Origen sees in the explicit teaching of Bible hidden reflections of higher truths.[22]

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20 On First Principles, Preface, 8.

21 Arthur C. McGiffert, A History of Christian Thought, Vol. I, Early and Eastern, New York, 1932, p. 212.

22 Norris, op. cit., p. 139.

But even though Origen firmly believes in the inspiration and unity of Scripture and conceives of the whole of its message as having relevance for the present, he is not blind to the difficulties inherent in such a view, especially those which the text itself supplies. Because by definition there can be nothing in Scripture which is unworthy of God, Origen the apologist is forced to find a higher meaning for certain passages which he views as unacceptable. He is aware, for example, of the anthropomorphic references to God, and prophecy which has not yet been fulfilled. He finds much in both Testaments which is immoral and unbecoming, and refers to certain Old Testament laws as being worse than those of the heathen. Some commands, e.g. those enunciated by Christ in the Gospels, are impossible to obey. There are accounts of events in Scripture which, if taken literally, are absurd such as references to night and day before the sun was created or Jesus seeing all the Kingdoms of earth from a high mountain. Even the Gospels contain passages which contradict each other.[23] Why then, if the Bible is the inspired Word of God, are there these apparent discrepancies? They are put there, reasons Origen, to act as signposts to the fact that everything in the Bible has a spiritual meaning. They are providentially placed to warn us that we are not on the right track if we pursue the literal sense, and to remind us that we must

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23 For a list of the difficulties which Origen discovers in the Bible see Frederic W. Farrar, History of Interpretation, London, 1886, p. 191.

leap over the literal to the spiritual if we would truly understand the Scriptures.[24]

The solution for Origen to problems raised by the apparent conflict between his view of Scripture and the difficulties which he discovers in the text brings us to the fourth presupposition of Origen's view, viz. that the Bible should be interpreted by the allegorical method. By this hermeneutical approach he is able to reconcile the concepts of the inspiration and the unity of Scripture, and its purpose, with textual discrepancies and embarrassing passages. Stated baldly, for Origen the Bible says one thing and means another. Every injunction and every narrative is really a mystery shrouding a secret sense which alone is of real value. This does not mean that in Origen's view none of the Bible is history, that no laws are understood literally or that no records of the life of Christ are to be taken as history.[25] There are only a few passages which have no literal meaning at all. By this qualification Origen shows himself aware of some of the dangers in an allegorical method which would dissolve redemptive history into timeless myth. He had before him the example of gnostic exegesis, presupposing a radical discontinuity between the plane of history and the divine realm so that there could be no contact. Origen stops short of this

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[24] For a discussion of this point, see Henry Chadwick, Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition, London, 1966, p. 112.

[25] On First Principles, IV. 3.4.

position and complains that the "heretics" go beyond Scripture.

But Origen does believe that all Scripture has more than a literal meaning. It has in addition a moral and a spiritual meaning which can be discerned by the allegorical method.[26] Origen is not content like Clement to accept the allegorical method merely because it is the traditional way of interpreting the Bible. In typical thoroughness he builds a rational argument for its use. He starts with the notion that earthly things in general and sacred history and law in particular are the shadows of things heavenly and invisible. If God made man in his own image, He may have made other earthly things after the image of the heavenly things. Thus by means of the world that is seen the soul is led upwards to the unseen and the eternal. This general principle is applied to Scripture in terms of the Platonic doctrine of the constitution of man. As man consists of body, soul and spirit, so the Scripture correspondingly has a literal (historical), moral and spiritual meaning.[27] Though he is not always clear on the difference between the moral and spiritual and often fuses them into one, in general he ascribes to the moral the passage's interior, practical and individual meaning and to the spiritual its collective, universal and "mysterious" meaning. In the parable of the mustard seed, for example, there is the seed itself (literal), the faith of the individual

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26 Perhaps the best treatment of Origen's allegorical methodology is R.C.P. Hanson, Allegory and Event, London, 1959.

27 On First Principles, IV. ii.4.

believer which the seed denotes (moral), and the Kingdom of God which the seed represents (spiritual). In this example there is no literal meaning which illustrates Origen's dictum that "all has a spiritual meaning but not all has a literal meaning."[28] Another example of Origen's exegesis which aptly illustrates his method of interpretation is his handling of the Song of Songs. It can be taken in its literal sense as a love poem. However, according to Origen, there are deeper meanings. At the moral level, the Canticles can be read as the soul's desire to be joined in fellowship with the Word of God. At the spiritual level, the love Song depicts the church's longing for union with Christ.[29]

Against his critics, Origen defends his use of the allegorical method in two ways: by an argument and an appeal to authority. His argument begins with the premise that the Bible is inspired and intended to instruct each generation in timeless truths. Therefore it cannot be what it appears to be, viz. ancient history or geography or ceremonial legislation for a bygone age. It follows that the only interpretive method which gives all parts of the Bible a contemporary existential relevance is allegory. The appeal to authority is essentially an appeal to Paul in whose writing Origen finds instances of the allegorical method. Origen refers specifically to Paul's use of the crossing of the

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28 Ibid., IV. 3.5.

29 Tollinton, ed., op. cit., pp. 79 ff.

Israelites through the Red Sea as an analogy of baptism, and his giving an allegorical twist to the story of Sarah and Hagar. From these instances Origen draws the sweeping conclusion that a mystical meaning must have been intended throughout the whole of Scripture.

Leaving the four fundamental presuppositions of Origen's approach to the Bible, we find that there are three additional matters which have been hinted at but need further elucidation in our analysis of Origen's method of biblical interpretation. First, in order to guide the interpreter who employs the allegorical method, Origen lists some objective rules. Not all the rules he frames are impressive to our modern ears, but the fact that he makes an attempt is significant. Those which are least impressive are his instructions concerning how to find clues to the hidden meaning of Scripture by studying the symbolism of numbers, Hebrew proper names of persons and places and grammatical oddities in the text. More acceptable are his rules on how to avoid private, unrestricted fantasy in one's interpretation. One does so (1) by taking Scripture not piecemeal, but as a whole; (2) by interpreting the obscure passages on the basis of the plain, comparing text with text; (3) by checking with teaching of other expositors; (4) by insisting on a christocentric interpretation; and (5) by hard work and prayer.[30] Secondly, even the utilization of these rules does not insure a correct interpretation. The

[30] Chadwick, Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition, p. 157.

interpreter also needs the grace of God. Origen explains that

> there is the doctrine that the Scriptures were composed through the Spirit of God and that they have not only that meaning which is obvious, but also another which is hidden from the majority of readers. For the contents of Scripture are the outward forms of certain mysteries and the images of divine things. On this point the entire church is unanimous, that while the whole law is spiritual, the inspired meaning is not recognized by all, but only by those who are gifted with the grace of the Holy Spirit in the word of wisdom and knowledge.[31]

The understanding of Scripture then is a grace.

Thirdly, Origen distinguishes between levels of inspiration in the biblical literature. It is true that in most passages Origen presupposed the similarity and equal value of all parts of the Scriptures, but in some instances he divides Scripture into stages and grades of inspiration depending on the worthiness of each author. In Christ the full revelation of the Logos was expressed. The apostles, however, while inspired, did not possess the same degree of inspiration as Christ. Further, Origen differentiates among the prophets and apostles, attributing various levels of inspiration to each one.[32]

IV. An Evaluation

The influence of Origen on his own time and subsequent generations was profound. While his views on biblical

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[31] On First Principles, Preface, 8. See Henri Crowzel, Origene et la Connaissance Mystique, Toulouse, 1961, pp. 400-409, for an examination of this issue.

interpretation were seldom accepted without the creation of controversy,[33] they were nevertheless accepted, and were gradually absorbed into the main stream of the church's thought.

In Origen's own time there is little question but that his hermeneutical system did have a positive role to play. In the first place, the allegorical method served the practical function of making it possible for an ancient text to be contemporary and relevant in the life of the church. No doubt this led to some errors in exegesis, but more importantly it gave the homiletician a tool that opened up biblical material which would have otherwise been closed to him. It freed him from the confines of a rigid authoritarianism, and he was able to draw a life-changing message from the pages of Scripture. Kept in bounds, such is the preacher's task in any age. In fact this may be the one justification for using the allegorical method in biblical interpretation. If the interpreter finds in a passage another level of meaning than the historical, he may, if he does not ignore or distort the historical sense, affirm that meaning.[34] Secondly, Origen's hermeneutics served the apologetic function of elevating the value of the Bible in an age when it was under attack. By use of allegory he was able to uphold the rationality of the Bible and its message against gnostic and pagan critics. Finally, it should not be

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[33] Both Augustine and Jerome were critical of Origen's views, and his teachings were officially condemned by the church in the sixth century.

[34] See St. Paul's use of allegory in Gal. 4:24, and a discussion of allegory in its relationship to theological interpretation in James Barr, Old and New in Interpretation, pp. 103-148.

forgotten that Origen was the father of grammatical as well as allegorical exegesis. Critics are fond of pointing to his fanciful allegory, but far less frequently give Origen credit as being the first great biblical scholar of the church.

But a lack of appreciation for Origen's gifts and scholarship on the part of many critics does not make their criticisms of his work any the less cogent. To the modern historically and critically minded scholar, Origen's allegorical method is simply inadequate. While Harnack's reference to Origen's exegesis as "biblical alchemy" may be a little unfair, it is nevertheless true that Origen's imagination did work overtime on etymological, cosmological and arithmetical speculation of obscure passages.[35] This unbridled subjectivism, to which the allegorical method lends itself, allowed Origen to find whatever suited his purpose or need within the pages of Scripture. Even a close adherence to the guiding rules which Origen suggests did not prevent him from forcing Scripture to yield up whatever would support his own viewpoint. There is little in his system to check the negative influence of preunderstanding. And of course there are few who would want to vindicate Origen's disregard of the biblical author's obvious purpose in his writing. To squeeze a spiritual meaning which the author did not intend out of every passage and to find symbols where there are none is indefensible.

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[35] See Tollinton, op. cit., pp. xxvii ff. for a list of examples.

Certainly no appeal to Paul's rare use of allegory can justify such activity.

To sum up, Origen's allegorical interpretation of Scripture is basically a failure to be truly historical. This is the case in two vital ways: (1) Under the influence of later Platonism, Origen did not see the Bible as a product of historical development but as an intellectual source book for speculative ideas. Even where he was inclined to be critical of its contents, his use of allegory made it possible for him to evade the historical problem. (2) As a result, he did not fully grasp the historical nature of its message. He failed to see that the self-revelation of God has occurred in history rather than in the realm of rationally conceived timeless truths. Origen's allegorical method of biblical interpretation is inadequate, then, because he did not allow "history" to check, define and give content to his faith.

Chapter Thirteen

Biblical Interpretation During the Reformation

Martin Luther

I. Luther in Context

The method of allegorical interpretation, most clearly articulated in the church by Origen, continued to influence biblical exegesis up to the close of the Middle Ages. Although this interpretive method was challenged at one time or another, it was not until the Reformation that a major shift in biblical hermeneutics took place. The chief figure in bringing about the change was of course Martin Luther. It is the profound influence of Luther's life and writings that justifies his inclusion in this study, not the fact that he has been neglected by historical scholarship. In fact, so much has been written about Luther that one hesitates to add to the collection.[1] But no account of the role of preunderstanding in biblical interpretation would be complete without mentioning him. His life and views not only illustrate and underline our central themes, but they provide the framework out of which so many subsequent interpreters of the Bible work.

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[1] One biographer of Luther, Ewald M. Plass, in his _This is Luther_, St. Louis, 1948, p. 4, claims that more has been written concerning Luther than any other historical figure except Jesus of Nazareth. In addition to the various editions of Luther's works which have appeared, there are also excellent bibliographies available, many in the back of the better biographies. See also the annual bibliography in _Luther-Jahrbuch_; H.S. Grimm, "Luther Research Since 1920", _The Journal of Modern History_, XXXII (1960), 105-118; Josef Korner, _Bibliographisches Handbuch des deutschen Schrifttums_, Bern, 1949; and K. Aland, _Hilfsbuch zum Lutherstudium_, 1958.

Before moving directly to Luther, it is necessary to cast a backward glance and pick up the main presuppositions which guided biblical interpretation between Origen and the Reformation.[2] This will enable us to appreciate the historical roots of Luther's thought and the significance of the change which he brought about. It was not long after the allegorical method of the Alexandrian school had been developed by Origen that it encountered opposition within the church. Jerome, who had at first been an advocate of the method, later rejected it and began increasingly to respect the literal meaning of Scripture, a shift of position influenced by his contact with Jewish teachers. In fact, wherever the influence of the synagogue was felt by the church, scriptural interpretation moved in the direction of literalism.

Such was the case at Antioch where the Jewish community had been prominent for a number of centuries. The Christians at Antioch, respecting the views of the Jewish leaders, criticized Origen's allegorization and rejected his appeal to Paul in Galations, chapter four. The Antiochenes maintained that Paul believed in the reality of the events which he described whereas the Alexandrians deprive biblical history of its reality. Theodore of Mopsuestia, in his Concerning Allegory and History Against Origen, argued that since in the allegorists' view there are no real events, then Adam was not

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[2] I am following the account given by Robert M. Grant, op cit., pp. 69-101.

really disobedient. How then, he asks, did death enter the world and what meaning does our salvation have? For the school of Antioch, the historical reality of the biblical revelation was essential. Though they did not deny the possibility of a higher or deeper meaning than the literal, they insisted that such meaning must be based upon history. The Antiochene tradition, with its insistence on the historical nature of revelation, was developed further in the writing and preaching of both Chrysostom and Jerome, and would continue to be one of the main forces in the church's understanding of the Bible, balancing the allegorical tradition.

Still another strand in the church's approach to biblical interpretation grew out of the uneasiness which was still felt by many Christian exegetes in their conflicts with Marcion and the gnostics. These minority groups and the later ones which followed them could also appeal to the authority of Scripture and did so convincingly. Interpreters within the main stream of the church's tradition often accused those outside of distorting the obvious meaning of the text. But as allegorization came to be accepted by the orthodox theologians, this charge lost much of its force. Church officials soon began to sense the need for an external authority which would permanently fix the meaning of Scripture. They found this authority in the Catholic Church itself. In the church, it was argued, Scripture had been preserved by those who stood in the apostolic succession. Tertullian of Carthage early in the third century was one of the first to state the argument, piecing it together from the

writing of Ireneaus to whom he owed much of his understanding of the Christian faith. In De praescriptione, written in about 200 A.D., Tertullian makes his case from a legal point of view, asserting that the Scriptures are the property of the church. His argument runs as follows: (1) Jesus Christ came to preach the truth of revelation; (2) He entrusted this truth to the apostles; (3) The apostles transmitted it to the apostolic churches which they founded; (4) Therefore, only those churches which stand in the succession of the apostles possess the teaching. This authoritative tradition was refined by Augustine in his De doctrina christiana written in 397 A.D. Augustine was no mere traditionalist, and insisted that a good exegete must be philologically trained, but held that the interpreter, in difficult and troublesome passages, should be guided by the tradition of the church.

There is little that is novel in biblical interpretation during the Middle Ages. Essentially it is a period of transition from the old patristic exegetical theology to the divorce between the Bible and theology which is found in the writing of Thomas Aquinas, a divorce which Luther did not accept. The materials of biblical study remain largely the same. There is a dependence upon a chain of interpretations pieced together from the commentaries of the fathers and a reliance on marginal or interlinear notes called a "gloss" which had been added to the text across the years of interpretation. The primary method of interpretation is the

allegorical with its postulate of a four-fold meaning to every text of Scripture.[3]

Toward the end of the medieval period Aquinas reasserted the importance of the literal sense of Scripture. He did not reject Origen's contention that Scripture contains a deeper "spiritual meaning", but emphasized in agreement with the Antiochene exegetes that such a meaning must be built on the literal. He further contended that exegesis is an objective study, not one which is guided by some inner grace. Here Aquinas interjects the modern note that reason is an autonomous agent and can make judgments on the meaning of Scripture. This note, present in the biblical humanists (e.g. Erasmus) and later rationalists (e.g. Spinoza), is also rejected by Luther.

Where Luther and all the reformers from John Wyclif on did agree with Aquinas was on the necessity of the literal and grammatical interpretation of Scripture. However, here again there is a difference. The reformers insisted on the right of the text, as literally interpreted, to stand alone. There are not several authorities in the church, but one which stands over against, if necessary, the fathers and the councils

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3 Occasionally the number of meanings in a given text varied anywhere between two and seven, four being by far the most common: (a) historical or literal which related the things said and done in the biblical record; (b) allegorical which deduced doctrine from the narratives; (c) anagogical which derived heavenly meanings from spiritual facts; and (d) tropological or moral which extracted lessons for life and conduct.

of the church. The church is not to be the arbiter of the meaning of Scripture, for Scripture, the Word of God, is the judge of the church. But the crucial question for Luther and the other reformers, as they placed the Bible in a position of authority in opposition to the church, was interpretation. How is the Bible to be interpreted correctly? In accordance with the purpose of our study, we will analyze the answer which Luther gives to this question in reference to his preunderstanding.

In a quite dramatic way Luther's preunderstanding in regard to the Bible was shaped by his life situation. The general course of Luther's life is well known and we need not go into it in detail. However, because certain events of his life had such an immediate influence on his understanding of the Bible, it might be helpful to remindourseves of some of these events.

Luther was born in 1483 to a lower-middle class miner's family in Eisleben.[4] His parents were able to provide him with a reasonably adequate elementary education. At fourteen he was sent to school at Magsburg and later to Eisenach. There is little in these early years to suggest the tumultuous career which he was to have.

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[4] There are over 200 biographies of Luther, many of them excellent. I have been helped by Roland Bainton, Here I Stand, New York, 1950, and Robert H. Fife, The Revolt of Martin Luther, New York, 1957. The debates over this and that in Luther's life are endless. E.G. Rupp in ch. 1 of his The Righteousness of God, London, 1953, traces the historiography of Luther.

In 1501 he enrolled at the University of Erfurt with the intention of pursuing a legal career which his father had strongly encouraged. At Erfurt Luther was exposed by the progressive faculty to the nominalist philosphy of the via moderna which included a study of the teachings of Scotus, Occam and Biel. This new school of Catholic theology laid increasing emphasis on God as personal will, and on sin as the expression and result of the rebellious will of man. There was a definite break with the medieval notion that there is in the human soul a fragment of the eternal Substance, and that it is possible for man to bring his divine endowment into union, fusion and oneness with the eternal Godhead by means of a technique of exercitia spiritualia. To this new school of thought, God was in no sense "Substance" but personal will. Between this holy will and the rebellious will of fallen and sinful man there does not and cannot exist a natural relationship or substantial kinship. From man's side there is an insuperable gulf which separates him from God. What is alone possible is a communion or fellowship betwen Person and person, the gracious initiative for it being and remaining ever with God, never with man--whose very response to it by faith is itself God's act and gift.[5] This exposure to the teachings of the via moderna should not be underestimated as a factor in the formation of Luther's preunderstanding.

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5 J.S. Whale, The Protestant Tradition, Cambridge, 1960, pp. 29-30.

Equally significant in the formation of Luther's pre-understanding was the sudden change which took place in his life on July 2, 1505, when the wind and the lightning of a thunder storm aided him in facing an inner crisis which had been building up for a number of months. He knelt before a statue of St. Anne and promised to enter a monastery. In the face of his father's anger, he entered a rather strict order of Augustinian Eremites at Erfurt.[6]

But Luther found little comfort under the authority of the Roman system and continued to be filled with fear and doubt. Continually haunted by the question of how to be righteous before a holy God, he threw himself into the discipline of the monastery. He writes:

> Being a monk, I wished to omit nothing of the prayers and often overtaxed myself with my courses and written work. I assembled my hours for an entire week and sometimes even two or three. Sometimes I would lock myself up for two or three entire days at a time, with neither food nor drink, until I had completed my breviary. My head became so heavy that I could not close my eyes for five nights. I was in agony and all confused.[7]

Luther was helped somewhat by an evangelical counselor, Vicar General Staupitz, who urged him to study the Bible and to teach at the new university at Wittenberg. After a brief stay at Wittenberg, he returned to Erfurt and assumed the

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[6] See Heinrich Boehmer, Der Junge Luther, Stuttgart, 1951, pp. 41 ff.

[7] Quoted by E.G. Schwiebert, Luther and His Times, St. Louis, 1950, p. 150.

responsibility of lecturing on Peter Lombard's Sentences. Still without peace of mind, Luther made a pilgrimage to Rome in 1510, a trip which did little but create a negative impression about the papacy. Returning to Germany, Luther resumed his study and teaching. Between 1513 and 1517 he threw himself into the serious study of Scripture, doing expositions of the Psalms, Genesis, Galations and Romans. By the time he was working out his commentary on Galatians, he was making use of many of the tools and methods of the biblical humanists, and particularly Erasmus' translation of the New Testament.[8]

In another dramatic crisis, the so-called "tower experience", a further important change took place in Luther's outlook. Believing that he had come face to face with God without being annihilated, he suddenly grasped the saving insight recorded by Paul in Romans 1:17 that "the righteous shall live by faith." Luther for the first time saw clearly that righteousness had to be a gift of God, not a demand of God in the law. For Luther this was good news and ultimately his apprehension of this biblical theme proved to be the turning point in his life. This message he came to believe was the true treasure of the church, though presently obscured by the misunderstanding of grace. Grace was not infused into the soul as a supernatural quality, with an admixture of works and merits, but a divine miracle which made possible trust

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8 Ibid., pp. 275 ff.

in and communion with God. Luther became convinced that such a message must be preached.

At first he saw no need for the repudiation of the past. But gradually the practices in the church around him forced him to ask why what he had discovered was not at the center of the church's message and ministry. Finally he was led to question the whole medieval ecclesiastical and sacramental system. In October of 1517 the issue came to a focus in Wittenberg over the matter of indulgences. An indulgence was a remission granted by the church for the temporal punishment due to sins already forgiven. It was dependent on the merits of Jesus Christ and the saints and implied a "treasury of merits" which had already been piled up of which the head of the church on earth was custodian and dispenser. In the late Middle Ages this practice had become vulgarized and commercialized by professional pardon-peddlers. In Luther's time Pope Julius II had established a jubilee indulgence to gain funds for St. Peter's in Rome. This offended German sensitivities, and the way the scheme was carried out violated the idea of free grace which Luther had discovered. A Dominican agent, Johannes Tetzel, was the huckster of indulgences in the Wittenberg area and provoked Luther's rage when he offered, upon payment for a certificate of indulgence, full remission of penalty in purgatory and a share in the merits of the saints without confession.

On October 31st Luther used the door of the castle church

as a bulletin board on which to nail his ninety-five theses. His objective was not to pose questions regarding the validity of the Pope, purgatory or even the indulgences, but simply to call attention to corrupt practices. "Whomever speaks against the truth of apostolic indulgence, let him be accursed and damned." (Thesis 71) But unintentionally Luther had "introduced a world-historical revolution" because of the distinction which he made between the Catholic sacrament of penance and Christ's words on penitence.[9]

Rome at first acted with semi-detachment. Leo X could not see that a theological dispute between monks could have much significance. But the matter soon took on larger proportions and Luther became involved in a defense of his thesis in the Heidelberg Disputation. There he encountered Tetzel, and later he met the papal emissary, Cajetan, at Augsburg. When he was labelled a heretic by John Eck the debate became even more heated. In 1519 at Leipzig Luther moved to the logical conclusions of his indulgence thesis, namely that the sacramental system with its emphasis on works and merits was wrong; that the Pope could err and in fact was the anti-Christ prefigured in certain New Testament writings; and that monasticism, mass, penance and merits were not the way to a better life, but perversions of the free grace of God in Christ. Rome countered with a denunciation and called on God to rise up and purge His vineyard of the rude

9 Heinrich Bornkamm, Luther's World of Thought, tr. by Martin H. Bertram, St. Louis, 1958, p. 45.

German wild boar. Sensing that a denunciation was not enough and that he had miscalculated Luther's power and popularity, the Pope later issued the bull Exsurge Domine which Luther and his colleagues burned on December 10, 1520, along with a copy of the canon law.

Luther continued to publish his views in a series of tracts and was called upon to defend them at the Imperial Diet of Worms. On this occasion he pushed aside his last opportunity to recant, justifying his stance by reference to his reliance on the apostolic witness and the voice of conscience. On leaving Worms, he was taken into protective custody at the Wartburg castle and proceeded to consolidate his view of Scripture. The remaining years of Luther's life were filled with preaching, teaching, writing and guiding the movement which he had begun. He died in 1541.

On the basis of this biographical sketch, let us attempt to piece together in summary form the main features of his preunderstanding which undergird the specific presuppositions of his hermeneutical system.[10]

In the first place, we would note that Luther's encounter with Rome forced him to face the question of conflicting ideologies regarding authority. Step by step, each new circumstance demanded that he clarify his own position. Did final authority on religious questions reside in the ecclesiastical institution with its power to dispense grace? Or did it reside in the individual conscience which seeks to

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10 Several recent volumes have explored the background of Luther's thought. See e.g. H. Bornkamm, op. cit.; Schwiebert, op. cit.; Walter G. Tillmann, The World and Men Around Martin Luther, Minneapolis, 1959; and V.H.H. Green, Luther and the Reformation, London, 1964.

know God's will as it is expressed in Scripture? Ultimately Luther had no choice but to question the whole basis of the medieval Catholic system and frame a new theological structure on the basis of biblical authority. This new structuring becomes for Luther the ideological foundation of his preunderstanding. It moves toward being comprehensive in its scope and operates as a major influence on his interpretation. It functions consistently, consciously and rationally throughout it.

Secondly, his own personal religious experiences, especially his internal sense of being accepted and forgiven by God in Christ, and his exposure to the teachings of the via moderna with its emphasis on God as personal will helped to mold his convictions concerning the central message of the Bible. This message he believed revolved around the matter of God's grace and man's faith over against law and works. By faith man apprehends God's gracious activity in Christ and is freed from the agonizing strictures of the law. In this conviction Luther elevates the attitude of faith to the central place in his preunderstanding. Faith becomes that attitude which is able to insightfully grasp the Word of God contained in Scripture. And it is this attitude of faith in Luther, as we will observe shortly, which is operative throughout his interpretation of Scripture.

Finally, we should give due consideration to the influence of Luther's education and study, both in kind and amount, on

forming his view that the Bible must be understood historically. His training in the via moderna at Erfurt, his reading of Augustine, his years of biblical study and exposition and finally his study and acceptance of the critical and exegetical work of the biblical humanists all contributed to the formulation of the methodology with which he approached the Bible. That Scripture cannot be understood apart from a study of the grammar of the text and an examination of the historical context in which it was written becomes the fundamental methodological assumption of Luther's approach to the Bible.

It is now necessary to see how these strands of Luther's preunderstanding--the ideological, the attitudinal and the methodological--come to expression in the specific presuppositions of his hermeneutical system.

II. Luther's Approach to the Bible[11]

We will examine Luther's approach to Scripture from three angles: (1) the assumptions he makes regarding the nature of the Bible; (2) the presuppositions which guide his interpretation of the Bible; and (3) his insistence on the need for faith in interpreting the Bible.

First, then, what is the Bible in Luther's eyes? What kind of a book is it? What does Luther assume about the nature of the Bible as he approaches it? Fundamentally for

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11 Books which deal specifically with Luther's interpretation of the Bible are Gerhard Ebeling, Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: Eine Untersuchung Luthers Hermeneutik, Munich, 1942; Michael Reu, Luther and the Scriptures, Columbus, 1944; J.K.S. Reid, The Authority of Scripture, New York, 1957; and Sydney Carter, The Reformers and Holy Scripture, London, 1928.

Luther the Bible is an <u>authoritative</u> book. Rome saw tradition and Scripture not as an either/or but as a both/and. In opposition, Luther asserted the principle of <u>sola scriptura</u>. He stressed the contradictions between the purity of the witness of the word of God in Scripture and the traditions of men in the church. According to Luther, ecclesiastical tradition had superseded Scripture, and the hierarchy of the church, as conservers of apostolic tradition and dispensers of the sacraments, had arrogated to themselves divine powers. As Luther viewed it, the question turned on the issue of authority. In the heat of the debate with Rome Luther proclaimed:

> Unless I am overcome with testimonies from Scripture or with evident reasons--for I believe neither pope nor the councils, since they have often erred and contradicted one another--I am overcome by the Scripture texts which I have adduced, and my conscience is bound to God's word. I cannot and will not recant anything: for to act contrary to one's conscience is neither safe nor sincere. God help me! Amen.[12]

In addition, Luther conceived the Bible to be an <u>inspired</u> book. Here we must be careful. Luther's view of inspiration was not what his followers later developed into the doctrine of verbal inerrancy.[13] Luther never worshipped the Bible.

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[12] Quoted by Plass, <u>This is Luther</u>, pp. 49-50.

[13] Though Luther could say: "Not only the words which the Holy Spirit and Scripture use are divine, but also the phrasing." In Ewald M. Plass, ed., <u>What Luther Says: An Anthology</u>, St. Louis, 1959, Vol. I, p. 65.

He could treat the text freely, argue with Paul and John, and question the canonicity of Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation. He doubted that Solomon was the author of Ecclesiastes or Proverbs and refers to Kings as "a hundred times better than Chronicles."[14] Yet Luther could say with conviction: "We intend to glory in nothing but Holy Scripture, and we are certain that the Holy Spirit cannot oppose and contradict Himself."[15] Thus for Luther the Bible is not a stereotyped collection of supernatural syllables. It has not been dictated by the Holy Spirit but His illumination produced in the minds of the biblical authors the knowledge of divine truth which they expressed in human form.

What gives the Bible its authoritative quality and authenticates the claim of inspiration is its message concerning Christ. The Bible for Luther is understood as a christocentric book. What is new about Luther's position in this matter is the way in which the content of the Bible (Christ) is linked with its authority and inspiration. In matters of faith and conduct the Bible is the sole norm and guide and it possesses this authority because of its divine origin. Yet the authority of the Bible is not imposed externally or arbitrarily but personally as we encounter Jesus Christ in faith on its pages. Paul Lehmann remarks on this point that

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14 Table Talk, tr. & ed. by William Hazlitt, London, 1857, pp. 11-12.

15 Plass, ed., What Luther Says, Vol. I, p. 72.

> the content of the Bible and the authority of the Bible are so interrelated as to derive the authority of the Bible from its content and to confirm the content of the Bible by its authority. The content of the Bible is its message concerning Jesus Christ. Consequently, it has divine authority. But this authority is not imposed from without. It is the authority of the Spirit of God by whose activity the record both came into being and is freely accepted by all who read and heed what it says.[16]

Finally we should note that Luther views the Bible as an understandable book. In the chief matters which pertain to law and gospel its message is plain. In the argument with Erasmus over the question of free will, Erasmus had remarked to Luther that much in Scripture is obscure. Luther replied in essence that it is our own fault if we do not understand Scripture. By continuous and solid study of language and grammar we can overcome the major difficulties, and what obscurities may remain only concern subordinate matters.[17] For Luther "the Holy Spirit is the plainest writer and speaker in heaven and on earth."[18]

The implications of Luther's insistence on the perspicuity of Scripture lead~~s~~ us to consider, secondly, the foundational presuppositions of Luther's interpretation of the Bible. In his early exposition of the Psalms (Dictate super Psalterium 1513-1515) Luther was still employing the allegorical

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[16] Paul Lehmann, "The Reformer's Use of the Bible", Theology Today, Vol. III (1946-47), 330-334.

[17] Kurt Aland, "Luther as Exegete", Expository Times, Vol. LXIX, No. 2 (Nov. 1957), 46.

[18] Plass, ed. What Luther Says, Vol. I, p. 91.

method of the four-fold sense of Scripture. But even in this he laid down the principle that nothing in Scripture is to be interpreted allegorically, tropologically or anagogically which is not elsewhere expressly stated historically. In the Seven Penitential Psalms (1517) he has forsaken the four-fold sense completely[19], and in his exposition of the Decalogue (1518) he has begun to mock scholastic interpreters who, according to Luther, treat scriptural interpretation as a game. Later he said: "The school divines with their speculations in holy writ, deal in pure vanities, in mere imaginings derived from human reason."[20] By the time he wrote Resolutions in 1518 he was convinced that traditional exegesis was wrong. It was not only wrong but evil because it was being used to justify practices and beliefs which Luther felt to be unbiblical.[21] Allegory is to be rejected except in those few isolated cases where the biblical author gives a special reason for its use. By 1518 Luther was convinced that "an interpreter must, as much as possible avoid allegory, that he may not wander into idle dreams."[22]

In place of the four-fold sense of the allegorical method Luther substituted the sensus literalis, grammaticus or historicus. There is essentially one meaning for each passage

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19 Luther's Works, ed. by J. Pelikan & D.E. Poellot, St. Louis, 1958, Vol. 14, pp. 137 ff.

20 Table Talk, p. 3.

21 B.A. Garrish, Grace and Reason, London, 1962, pp. 143-144.

22 Quoted by F. Farrar, op. cit., p. 328.

of Scripture and it is to be ascertained by contextual and grammatical study. "Each passage", he asserts, "has one clear, definite and true sense of its own. All others are but doubtful and uncertain opinions."[23] It is the literal or obvious sense of Scripture which is the guide for faith and Christian theology. Natural speech is queen and superior to all subtle or clever inventions. And of course the way to understand the obvious intent of the language is by having a knowledge of the biblical languages, making use of all the grammatical tools available, studying the times, circumstances and conditions in which the author wrote and observing the context of each passage to be interpreted. Luther was even willing to allow that if it could be shown that any of his interpretations of passages were grammatically untenable, he would not cling to them, however edifying. He refused to fall back on the evasion that he was offering a special, spiritual sense which the words concealed in addition to the literal sense. In accord with his insistence on the historical interpretation of Scripture was the principle that Scripture is <u>sui ipsius interpres</u>. Scripture is its own best interpreter, "and, indeed, that is the right method. Scripture should be placed alongside Scripture in a right and proper way."[24] The Bible is not obscure so that the tradition is required in order to understand it. Rather Scripture possesses

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[23] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 327.
[24] Plass, ed., <u>What Luther Says</u>, Vol. I, p. 88.

claritas, i.e. it has illuminating power.[25] The meaning of biblical terms is not determined on the basis of their usage in Aristotle, the fathers or dictionary definition, but on the basis of their usage in Scripture. The more obscure passages are made clear by the ones whose meaning is obvious. Says Luther: "It is indeed true that some passages of Scripture are dark; however, they contain nothing but precisely that which is found at other places in clear, open passages."[26] While Luther often applied this principle as part of his general historical approach to the Bible, i.e. comparing passage with passage in order to understand the historical situation and the author's intent, it is also true that he often used the principle in a more theological way. Each passage should be interpreted in light of the whole, which meant for Luther, in light of his understanding of the central message of the Bible, justification by faith. At this point Luther has moved beyond the historical to the experiential. The tools of scholarly labors are not enough.

This then leads us to a consideration of a third matter in Luther's approach to biblical interpretation, namely that the interpreter of Scripture in order to understand its meaning must be a man of faith. In Luther there is not only the scholar's desire to interpret the text accurately and faithfully by means of the best tools of historical

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25 Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, pp. 306-307.
26 Plass, ed., *What Luther Says*, Vol. I, p. 75.

science, but there is also the believer's desire to search the text for further illumination of his own decisive experience. Exegesis is never merely historical. It begins there but proceeds in faith under the guidance of the Spirit to discover the redemptive message of Christ.

Faith is the necessary preunderstanding for an adequate interpretation of Scripture. For Luther faith includes both understanding and experience. One must comprehend the message in its totality in order to understand its parts. "For although an understanding of the words is first in order, yet an understanding of the subject matter is of great importance."[27] But such understanding is not a mere intellectual grasp but an illuminating experience. The man who understands is the one who has encountered God in Christ and who is justified by His grace. The exegete who has faith understands Scripture not by the autonomous use of reason but by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Luther writes: "Scripture is the sort of book which calls not only for reading and preaching but also for the right interpretation: the revelation of the Holy Spirit."[28] It is only the man to whom the Spirit of God has been given who will be able to understand Scripture as a whole or in its separate parts. For without the Spirit no one will perceive anything in Scripture rightly, not even when he has the most intimate acquaintance with its

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27 Ibid., p. 94.
28 Ibid., p. 76.

contents. But he who has the Spirit of God--anyone, not just a priest--is able to grasp the essential message. Luther did not always find this doctrine of the right of private judgment an easy one to maintain. In the controversies which surrounded his life, nearly all of his opponents appealed to Scripture to support their case. But Luther rightly preferred a storm of debate to the stagnation of enforced conformity.

The man of faith directed by the Holy Spirit is guided by one final rule, namely "to find Christ everywhere in Scripture." This christocentric emphasis is perhaps the central feature of Luther's hermeneutical position. It is the gospel message which has been grasped by faith which supplied the key to the meaning of Scripture. The historical interpretation of Scripture is not an end in itself but a means of understanding Christ who is taught in all of the books of the Bible. In the final analysis Luther returns to the christocentric interpretation which is found in the New Testament. This principle supplies Luther with a criterion to judge Scripture. By faith the exegete can determine which passages effectively "preach Christ" and which do not. He writes in his introduction to the Epistle of James: "All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach Christ and deal with Him. This is the true test by which to judge all books when we see whether they deal with Christ or not, since all the Scriptures show us Christ."[29] Luther then identifies Scripture with the

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29 Quoted by Lehmann, "The Reformer's Use of the Bible", p. 337.

gospel of Jesus Christ, not with the explicit contents of a number of books. He insists on the primacy of those books which speak of Christ, for Christ, the very word of God, is himself the content of the word of God in the Bible. Such a view led him to a typological understanding of the Old Testament and allows a form of allegorical interpretation to re-enter exegesis. But he never allowed allegorical interpretation to establish proofs of the authority of the church; Christ remains above all merely human authority.

Thus Luther understands the Bible as an authoritative, inspired, christocentric and understandable book. It is to be interpreted literally and historically with the best philological tools available. But such study is not an end in itself. He who would truly understand the Scriptures must be a man of faith in whom the Holy Spirit is working to reveal the message of Christ.

III. An Appraisal

There is much that is commendable in Luther's views on the interpretation of the Bible, indeed far more than we have reason to mention for the purposes of this study. We will content ourselves with calling attention to the way in which his view relates to our theme of preunderstanding.

In the first place, Luther recognizes the necessity of and rightly insists on the employment of a historical methodology in the study and interpretation of Scripture. He sees clearly that without a historical check, interpreters can make the Bible say anything which suits their fancy.

Only a literal and grammatical approach is able to uncover the Bible's true meaning and protect against the negative influence of preunderstanding. Secondly, Luther is also aware of the impossibility of reason to offer a detached and objective analysis of the message of Scripture. It is only the man with the preunderstanding of faith who is able to discern the Bible's decisive and redemptive content, the Word of God. Thus for Luther it is possible to correctly interpret the Bible only when it is approached in faith by historical study.

But as Luther worked out this hermeneutical theory in practice he revealed himself, for all his genius, to be limited, as all men are, by his time and place in history. He was a child of his times in his uncritical acceptance of the historicity of the biblical narratives. The tools, methods and presuppositions of scholarly study of the Bible which he employed, while advanced for his day, were nevertheless primitive by modern standards. He was also a child of his times in his use of the Bible in argument and controversy. Failing to appreciate fully both the historical origins of the Bible and its historical development of thought, he often resorted to the proof-text method in arguing his case. Further, Luther was a child of his times, though understandably so, in setting the Bible so radically over against the church. His principle of <u>sola scriptura</u> was perhaps a necessary corrective for his time, but one which now needs to be viewed in a

different light, taking cognizance of the fact that we always understand the Bible from within the tradition of the church.

We have one final reservation about Luther's view, one in which he is not so much a child of his times, but one in which the necessary balance between faith and history appears to be weighted in favor of faith. We have in mind his christological interpretation of the Bible, and particularly of the Old Testament. The objection we raise here is not so much one of principle as it is one of emphasis and application. It does not violate our understanding of history to maintain that Christ is prefigured in the Old Testament. But to find him everywhere is to contradict the literal-historical principle of interpretation and to fail to appreciate the historical context and message.

But this objection appears insignificant beside the abiding value of his views. His influence has been felt by nearly all interpreters of the Bible since his time. It is true that rationalists like Spinoza[30], standing outside of the church and in an altogether different tradition, came under the influence of Luther very little--if at all. But biblical interpreters within the church, even among Roman Catholic exegetes (though partly in reaction) and more particularly among Protestant exegetes, have not escaped the impact of Luther's approach to the Bible. The Pietist tradition of biblical interpretation which we will discuss in the person

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30 See ch. 14.

of John Wesley[31] appealed to the subjective emphases in Luther's teaching. Classical Orthodoxy, whose views we will assess in the preaching of Charles Spurgeon[32], while perhaps more influenced by Calvin than Luther, nevertheless saw in Luther's insistence on the inspiration and authority of Scripture an anchor for their theological system. Even the "modern" interpreters of the Bible, whose views grew out of the revolution in historical thinking in the nineteenth century and which we will consider in the popularized form of Harry Emerson Fosdick[33], could find in Luther's critical approach toward certain books of the New Testament and his stress on the necessity of an historical and grammatical approach to the text the beginning of an attitude which would characterize their method. We turn now to examine these various hermeneutical approaches.

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31 See ch. 15.

32 See ch. 16.

33 See ch. 17.

Chapter Fourteen

Spinoza and Rationalism

I. Spinoza in the Age of Natural Science

In our survey of selected interpreters of the Bible we have considered two thinkers whose preunderstanding was firmly rooted in the conviction that God is and that He has made Himself known in Jesus Christ. Though differing greatly in their hermeneutical systems, both Origen and Luther shared a common faith in Christ. It was their faith which was foundational in their approach to the Bible. But in order to gain a more representative perspective on biblical interpretation, it is necessary to consider an interpreter of Scripture whose basic starting point was not gleaned from within the Christian community. We have chosen the philosopher Spinoza whose preunderstanding was shaped by the revolutionary new patterns of thought which were developing in the late Renaissance.

The natural science period of the Renaissance is customarily dated from 1600 to 1690. In this period the Counter Reformation checked the free flow of thought in Italy, and unfortunate religious wars and assorted controversies discouraged philosophical work in Germany. In England, Holland and France the situation was more favorable and not a few brilliant achievements were made.

One great achievement of this era was the formation of

new methods for philosophical investigation. In this period both Bacon and Descartes advanced a new method which was to be subsequently influential. In addition to method, there was a second form of achievement brought about by the work of Hobbes, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz--the erection of rational systems which gave primacy to reason as the source of knowledge.[1] Spinoza's preunderstanding, as we will attempt to show, combines both the method and the system characteristic of his age, and largely determines his approach to biblical interpretation.

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) came from a family of Jews who were driven out of Spain and Portugal by the Inquisition, and had taken refuge in Amsterdam. He received a good education for his time, studying the Bible and Talmud in Hebrew, and Jewish books upon religious and philosophical subjects. He learned Latin in the school of Van Ende, a nominal Roman Catholic. There he also read the works of Descartes and other modern philosophers, and studied mathematics and natural science.[2] This kind of exposure soon made it difficult for him to accept all the statements of the Bible, together with the rabbinical interpretations, in a strictly literal manner. At twenty-four he was expelled from the synagogue and became an outcast from his own people. Some see in this expulsion the underlying motive of his philosophy, i.e. the attempt to find some lasting good independent of external circumstances.[3]

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[1] William K. Wright, _A History of Modern Philosophy_, New York, 1941, pp. 38-39.

[2] James Martineau, _A Study of Spinoza_, London, 1883, pp. 21-26.

[3] Wright, _op. cit._, p. 93.

After his expulsion from the Jewish community, Spinoza assumed the Latin form of his first name, Benedict, and lived among Christians. He was able to support himself by grinding lenses, but devoted the major portion of his time to the pursuit of philosophy. In each of the places where he stayed, chiefly small towns in the vicinity of Amsterdam, he found intellectually minded friends who encouraged him in his philosophical pursuits and studied his philosophy in manuscript form. In the course of time Spinoza became well enough known to be offered a professorship at the University of Heidelberg, and a pension from Louis XIV on the condition that Spinoza dedicate a book to him. Both options he refused, determined to lead an independent life and not risk his freedom to express his convictions. Spinoza lived out the remainder of his life grinding lenses, dying of consumption at forty-five.

The clue to the main attitudinal component of Spinoza's preunderstanding can be found in his refusal to accept any position in life which would prevent him from honestly expressing his views. The fundamental attitude which functions consciously in his approach to Scripture is one of openness to truth. He was determined to come to the Bible with no preconceived ideas. How consistently this attitude was operative in his interpretation of Scripture is a question we will attempt to answer shortly.

The ideological and methodological elements in Spinoza's

preunderstanding developed under the influence of a number of writers, but the really formative influences were of two very distinct kinds. There was of course the influence of Judaism on the one hand, and on the other, the New Philosophy.[4] His Jewish upbringing was probably responsible for his use of the word "God" for the ultimate reality, though it is obvious he did not borrow the identification of God with nature from the Old Testament writers.[5] In addition, Spinoza's rational criticism of the Bible no doubt had roots in the teaching of the medieval Jewish philosophers.[6]

The influence of the New Philosophy is even more evident. He was acquainted with Bruno (1548-1600) who taught that the solution to the problem of the one and the many lay in the direction of pantheism. Durant describes Bruno's philosophy in the following manner:

> All reality is one substance, one in cause, one in origin; and God and this reality are one. The object of philosophy is to perceive unity in diversity, mind in matter, and matter in mind; to find the synthesis in which opposites and contradictions meet and merge; to rise to that highest knowledge of universal unity which is the intellectual equivalent of the love of God.[7]

It is not difficult to see these ideas in Spinoza's thought. Descartes, too, was an important influence. What attracted Spinoza was Descartes' conception of one homogeneous substance underlying matter and another homogeneous substance underlying

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[4] J. Alexander Gunn, Benedict Spinoza, Melbourne, 1925, p. 35.

[5] Frederick Copleston, S.J., A History of Philosophy, London, Vol. IV, p. 208.

[6] Gunn, op. cit., p. 36.

[7] Will Durant, The Story of Philosophy, New York, 1943, p. 116.

mind.[8] Spinoza was keen and bold enough to develop the implications of this Cartesian philosophy in a monistic way.[9] In addition, Spinoza's method of philosophical investigation was similar to that of Descartes. Clear and distinct ideas are true; confused ideas are inadequate and false. Reasoning progresses in a series of propositions with the highest certainty found in intuition.[10] Descartes' influence is obvious in both system and method. Hobbes and Bacon also left their mark on Spinoza. Hobbes' influence is evident in Spinoza's political philosophy, not our present concern, but Bacon's inductive methodology is especially evident in Spinoza's handling of Scripture.

It should not be concluded from this list of influences on Spinoza that his work was of a derivative sort. He did his own original work and "escapes all ready made labels or classifications."[11] Nevertheless it is possible to see the main currents of the thought of his age shaping his philosophical system. And it is this philosophical system, functioning as a comprehensive preunderstanding, that he brings to his interpretation of Scripture. Therefore, before we can deal adequately with Spinoza's hermeneutic, we must touch briefly on those aspects of his philosophy which are directly related to and form the background for his approach to the Bible.

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8 Ibid., p. 117.
9 Wright, op. cit., p. 90.
10 Ibid., p. 95.
11 Stuart Hampshire, Spinoza, London, 1962, p. 26.

Ideologically, it is his epistemology and his theology which are central to his interpretation of Scripture. Sprinoza distinguishes three different kinds of knowledge: opinion, reason and intuition. Under opinion he puts the ordinary observations of the senses given in experience, images aroused by association of ideas, memories, words, symbols and information transmitted by tradition.[12] These lack scientific exactitude, and are fragmentary and confused. Spinoza, on the other hand, has absolute confidence in reason and intuition. Reason is possible because all men share in the same characteristics and give assent to patterns inherent in geometry and syllogism. The third kind of knowledge, intuition, comes if one knows anything completely, and understands it in its ultimate nature and necessity, which for Spinoza is some aspect of God.[13]

His epistemology leads directly into his theology or monism. Father Copleston begins his discussion of Spinoza with the remark that "the most conspicuous idea of Spinoza's philosophy is that there is only one substance, the infinite divine substance which is identified with nature; Deus sive natura, God or Nature."[14] Descartes had defined substance as "an existent thing which requires nothing but itself in

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[12] B. Spinoza, On the Improvement of the Understanding in Works of Spinoza, tr. by R.H.M. Elwes, London, 1884, Vol. II, p. 45.

[13] Wright, op. cit., p. 96.

[14] Copleston, op. cit., p. 206.

order to exist."[15] Spinoza accepts this definition and labels the substance God. God, for Spinoza, is a mathematical necessity and scientific law; one, infinite, complete, all-embracing, self-sustaining substance; the ultimate ground and essence of everything mental and physical and the only kind of God compatible, as he thought, with modern knowledge.[16] The highest good for man is the intellectual love of "God" who is the logical ground of the mechanical laws of nature. Both of these presuppositions, the epistemological and the theological, functioning dependently, have a major influence on his views. They operate consistently, consciously, rationally and, as one would expect, somewhat closed-mindedly throughout his interpretation.

The methodological center of the preunderstanding with which Spinoza comes to the Bible, beyond the methodology inherent in his philosophical system, is induction. Taking his cue from Bacon, Spinoza wants to make judgments about the Bible by reasoning from its various parts to the nature of its whole. He attempts to examine it in its particulars before reaching any general conclusions. It is only as one goes from the individual to the universal that sound judgments can be reached. This methodological presupposition is a major influence on and operates consciously in Spinoza's interpretation.

II. Spinoza's Interpretation of the Bible

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15 Quoted by Wright, <u>op. cit</u>., p. 98.

16 <u>Ibid</u>., p. 94.

We turn now to see how these various strands of Spinoza's preunderstanding come to expression in his hermeneutical system. Spinoza's objective as he approaches the problem of interpreting Scripture is really twofold: (1) to interrogate the Bible in accord with the science of the day; and (2) to preserve his notion of an immanent God discerned by intuition. These two objectives share the common motive of preserving his freedom while giving him the security of an unchanging good which would not be subject to the unsure particulars of history and fickle human nature.

It is in the <u>Theologico-Political Treatise</u> that Spinoza's approach to Scripture is found. He begins the treatise with an attempt to refute the view that the state owes its origin to divine institution. At this point, Spinoza's attitude of being open to truth and resisting all external interference in the formation of his thought is clearly evident. There were those in his time who argued that the modern state was like the Jewish theocracy in the Old Testament, and that it was granted authority by the will of God to regulate the expressions of views in science, philosophy and religion. As a refutation of this point of view, Spinoza maintains that the Hebrew political institutions were intended only for the Hebrews and not for the present. He further argues that the Scriptures are designed primarily for the particular people, and only secondarily for the human race. On a slightly different tack, but with the same objective, he argues that the contents of the Bible are necessarily adapted to the level of

understanding of the popular mind. Gunn comments that "Spinoza insists on the essential humanism of the Bible; we must read it as a book written by men who were writing for men."[17] Hence the Bible, Spinoza feels, especially as it was interpreted by his contemporaries who used it against him, is less than binding. The fundamental purpose of the Theologico-Political Treatise is thus a persuasive plea for freedom.

In his Preface, Spinoza clarifies his method and gives us a revealing glimpse into the conclusions he hopes to reach. Regarding method, he points out that there are those who believe a priori that every passage of Scripture is true and divine. "But", he goes on, "such a doctrine should be reached only after strict scrutiny and thorough comprehension of the Sacred Books...and not be set up on the threshold, as it were, of inquiry."[18] The Bible must be interrogated and examined in the same fashion as nature. Spinoza employs the method of induction to the contents of the Bible. He states in a straightforward manner: "I determine to examine the Bible afresh in a careful, impartial, and unfettered spirit, making no assumptions concerning it, and attributing to it no doctrines, which I do not find clearly therein set down."[19] This is a very significant passage and its implications will be treated below, but perhaps here we should note that he is not wholly consistent in carrying out his objective. He does

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17 Gunn, op. cit., p. 82.

18 A Theologico-Political Treatise in Works of Spinoza, London, 1884, Vol. I, p. 8.

19 Ibid., p. 8.

make certain assumptions about the Bible (e.g. that it is a product of its authors' imaginations), assumptions common to the new philosophy of his age. But in fairness to Spinoza, it is important to notice that he wants to begin with no assumptions. He asserts that we cannot say a priori that the Bible is inspired or authoritative. Only by examining its particulars can we say anything about it in general. We must reason from the individual to the universal.

What does Spinoza uncover in his inductive investigation? He breaks the suspense by hinting at the answer in advance, an answer which is not unexpected and which underlines the fact that one always approaches interpretation with some form of prior understanding.

> Now, as in the whole course of my investigation I found nothing taught expressly by Scripture, which does not agree with our understanding, or which is repugnant thereto, and as I saw that the prophets taught no thing, which is not very simple and easily grasped by all, and further, that they clothed their teaching in the style, and confirmed it with the reasons, which would most deeply move the mind of the mass to devotion towards God...[20]

Let us now look to see how Spinoza came to these conclusions. In chapters 1-3 Spinoza deals with prophecy and the role of the prophet among the Hebrews. Prophecy he defines as revelation, a sure knowledge revealed by God to man, and a prophet as "one who interprets the revelations of God to those who are unable to attain to sure knowledge of the matters revealed, and therefore can only apprehend them

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20 Ibid., p. 9.

by simple faith."[21] The prophet, however, perceives revelation in parables and allegories, or in more Spinozian words, he grasps the revelation of God with the aid of imagination.[22] No one except Christ received the revelation of God without the aid of the imagination.[23] Nevertheless, the prophet's perception was partially accurate. The doctrine of the Spirit of God in Scripture means that the prophets were given a special power to perceive the mind of God. "The imagination of the prophets, inasmuch as through it were revealed the decrees of God, may equally be called the mind of God, and the prophets be said to have possessed the mind of God."[24] The imagination does not possess in itself any guarantee of truth, such as with clear and distinct ideas, but requires some external reason to assure certainty.[25] These external conditions are three in number: (1) the things revealed must be imagined very vividly; (2) there must be the presence of signs; and (3) the mind of the prophet must be wholly given to what is right and good.[26] Even with these extrinsic conditions fulfilled, the certitude afforded is not mathematical, only moral, because the prophet's message is colored by his own

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[21] Ibid., p. 13.

[22] Ibid., p. 25. Imagination is a technical term for Spinoza. It refers to mental images as opposed to the clear and distinct idea which is not connected in the mind with any particular mental picture projected from our sense experience. What the prophet says about God he says from his imagination, but God is outside of sense experience. Therefore what the prophet says is distorted. See Hampshire, op. cit., pp. 16-24.

[23] Ibid., p. 19.

[24] Ibid., p. 24.

[25] Ibid., p. 28.

[26] Ibid., p. 29.

individual disposition and personal opinions.[27] Sure knowledge of God by this method remains tenuous, and is suited for those who can only apprehend God's revelation "by simple faith."

Spinoza has put the question of certain knowledge about God to Scripture and found it wanting. The next logical step is to see if there is a higher "revelation" which will provide secure knowledge of God. It is through the notion of Divine law that he approaches the problem. Law he defines as "that which an individual, or all things, or as many things as belong to a particular species, act in one and the same fixed and definite manner."[28] Such laws can be perceived by reason and intuition. Divine law, which can also be perceived in the same fashion, is that which is concerned with the highest good, the true knowledge of God and love. Certain knowledge which removes every doubt depends solely on man's capacity of intuition and reason. This apprehension of God comes because God is the ground and source of all things. It follows that "all natural phenomena involve and express the conception of God as far as their essence and perfection extend, so that we have greater and more perfect knowledge of God in proportion to our knowledge of natural phenomena: conversely...the greater our knowledge of natural phenomena, the more perfect is our knowledge of the essence of God."[29]

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27 Ibid., pp. 32-33.
28 Ibid., p. 57.
29 Ibid., p. 59.

He concludes that the highest blessedness is "the intellectual knowledge of God, the most perfect Being."[30] Our knowldge of God, and also our love of Him, are derived from general ideas, in themselves certain and known, not from the unsure historical narrative contained in Scripture.[31] Spinoza is even bold enough to say that "Scripture literally approves of the light of natural reason and the natural divine law."[32] But to justify this claim, he has to deal with those sections of Scripture which appear to contradict it.

He disposes of the binding relevance of ceremonial law by arguing that these observances were ordained in the Old Testament for the Hebrews only, and that they formed no part of the divine law.[33] They had reference only to the government of the Jews, and were designed to bring temporal advantages to the masses.[34] Miracles, too, are defined to fit the pattern of interpretation which Spinoza has established. He deprecates the popular mind for thinking that "the power and providence of God are most clearly displayed by events that are extraordinary and contrary to the conception they have formed in nature."[35] The masses call such unusual phenomena miracles, but nature cannot be contravened. It has a fixed and immutable order.[36] A miracle is either a subjective imagining, or a natural phenomenon which hides its source.

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30 Ibid., p. 60.
31 Ibid., p. 61.
32 Ibid., p. 68.
33 Ibid., p. 69.
34 Ibid., p. 76.
35 Ibid., p. 81.
36 Ibid., p. 82.

Indeed, "many things are narrated in Scripture as miracles of which the causes could easily be explained by reference to ascertained workings of nature."[37] There is always a "res mere naturalis." If it were otherwise, one could not see God, for what is foreign to nature is also foreign to God.[38]

Having established that the revelation contained in Scripture has limited value, and that a better understanding of God can be discerned by reason, a position which Spinoza affirms that Scripture itself teaches, he is ready to ask the question which is central to our discussion. How then should we interpret the Scriptures? Should we interpolate, invent novelties, and impose our prejudicial point of view so that superstition may abound? God forbid! Superstition "teaches men to despise reason and nature and only to admire and venerate that which is repugnant to both."[39] We must escape from the crowd in order to interpret Scripture correctly. To be free from the danger of error, we have only to apply to Scripture a method similar to that used in interpreting nature, viz. induction. He says:

> I may sum up the matter by saying that the method of interpreting Scripture does not widely differ from the method of interpreting nature--in fact, it is almost the same. For as the interpretation of nature consists in the examination of the history of nature, and therefrom deducing definitions of natural phenomena on certain axioms, so Scriptural interpretation proceeds by the examination

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37 Ibid., p. 84.

38 Martineau, op. cit., p. 355.

39 Spinoza, Theologico-Political Treatise, p. 99.

> of Scripture, and inferring the intention of its authors as a legitimate conclusion from its fundamental principles.[40]

Spinoza does not doubt the value of this method. He goes on:

> By working in this manner everyone will always advance without danger of error--that is, if they admit no principles for interpreting Scripture, and discussing its contents save such as they find in Scripture itself--and will be able with equal security to discuss what surpasses our understanding and what is known by the natural light of reason.[41]

Because Scripture often treats matters which cannot be deduced from principles known to reason (e.g. narratives and revelation), and because Scripture does not give us definitions of things, we must seek for the principle s and definitions from the Bible itself. The procedure then in interpreting Scripture is to examine its history. "The universal rule", he argues, "is to accept nothing as an authoritative Scriptural statement which we do not perceive very clearly when we examine it in the light of its history."[42] The principle of induction leads Spinoza to the acceptance of the historical method as the means of determining what Scripture says.

Scriptural history, according to Spinoza, is comprised of three ingredients: (1) the nature and properties of the language in which the books of the Bible were written, i.e. Hebrew; (2) an analysis of each book and arrangement of its

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40 Ibid., p. 99.
41 Ibid., p. 100.
42 Ibid., p. 101.

contents under heads, taking special note of those passages which are ambiguous, obscure or seem mutually contradictory, and guarding against the imposition of any external principle of interpretation which has no foundation in Scripture; and (3) a study of

> the environment of all the prophetic books extant; that is, the life, the conduct, and the studies of the author of each book, who he was, what was the occasion, and the epoch of his writing, whom did he write for and in what language. Further, it should inquire into the fate of each book: how it was first received, into whose hands it fell, how many different versions there were of it, by whose advice was it received into the Bible, and lastly, how all the books now universally accepted as sacred, were united into a single whole.[43]

Once this historical investigation is completed, the interpreter can proceed. The next step is to determine what is universal and common to Scripture, and then from there one is able to go back to what is less universal, just as with the history of nature. The universal element is that which is the basis and foundation of all Scripture and which is taught by all the prophets as eternal and most profitable for men. Whatever is obscure or ambiguous in Scripture is explained and defined by this universal doctrine.[44] As an example of such a universal doctrine Spinoza cites Matthew 6:33 which teaches that men should seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness above all else. The passage,

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[43] Ibid., pp. 101-103.
[44] Ibid., p. 104.

"Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted", can be explained in light of Matthew 6:33. It is those who mourn for the Kingdom of God and for righteousness who shall be comforted.[45]

This simple rule of interpreting the incidental by the universal works well with the practical passages, but "the purely speculative passages"[46] are more difficult. The method, however, does not change perceptibly. The interpreter of the speculative matters of Scripture must never simply infer the intention of one author from a clearer passage in the writings of another. Why is this the case? Because the prophets adapted their writings to the prejudices of their age. But how does one then arrive at the objective of the prophet? There is only one way, and that is to "begin from the most universal proposition. Then we must proceed to miracles, and so on to whatever is most general until we come to the opinions of a particular prophet, and at last, to the meaning of a particular revelation, prophecy, history, or miracle."[47] One must always be careful not to let an

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[45] Ibid., p. 105.

[46] Unfortunately Spinoza gives no example of a speculative passage. His precise meaning therefore is left in doubt. Perhaps the clue to his meaning is to be found in his contrast of the speculative with the practical, the former dealing with abstract concepts, the latter with specific guidelines for daily living.

[47] Ibid., p. 106.

established tradition, or the meaning of a word, which can easily be twisted, dictate the meaning of a particular passage.[48]

Even a careful application of this principle does not assure accurate knowledge of the text. There are at least three difficulties which, Spinoza argues, are impossible to surmount: (1) inadequate resources make it impossible to gain a thorough knowledge of Hebrew; (2) lack of records makes knowing the history of all that has happened to every book of the Bible unachievable; and (3) the books of Scripture are no longer extant in their original language.[49] He concludes: "The foregoing difficulties in this method of interpreting Scripture from its own history I conceive to be so great that I do not hesitate to say that the true meaning of Scripture is in many places inexplicable, or at best mere subject for guesswork...."[50]

But this conclusion does not mean that we cannot know what is important in Scripture. These difficulties only arise when we try to follow the meaning of the prophet in matters which cannot be perceived by clear and distinct ideas that are conceivable through themselves. This is of course Spinoza's trump card. "Thus we conclude that we can easily follow the intention of Scripture on moral questions...."[51] The precepts of piety come across clearly in Scripture, and

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[48] Ibid., p. 107.
[49] Ibid.,
[50] Ibid., pp. 108-111.
[51] Ibid., p. 112.

of such does salvation and blessedness consist. It is not really necessary to be disturbed over what remains after reason and understanding have done their work, for such matters are more curious than profitable. He goes on to say:

> Besides, I do not doubt that everyone will see that such a method only requires the aid of natural reason. The nature and efficacy of the natural reason consists in deducing and proving the unknown from the known, or in carrying premises to their legitimate conclusions; and these are the very methods which one method desiderates.[52]

There are still a few more matters which remain to Spinoza in order to tidy up his argument. The first is to consider the opinions of those from whom he differs. One group with whom Spinoza disagrees maintains that the light of nature has no power to interpret Scripture, but a supernatural faculty is required for the task. This contention, Spinoza thinks, is only an "obscure way of stating their complete uncertainty about the true meaning of Scripture."[53] Such people interpret Scripture just like the rest of mankind, and with the same limited grasp of history. If a supernatural faculty exists at all, it is given only to a faithful few.

Spinoza also has a point of contention with Maimonides who held that one could never be sure of a passage until it was obvious that the passage contained nothing contrary or repugnant to reason. This point of view, argues Spinoza,

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[52] Ibid., p. 113.

[53] Ibid., p. 114.

has a number of difficulties: (1) it leads to a twisting and an explaining away of the words of Scripture, because reason cannot infer what we find in Scripture; (2) it leads to an elite group of philosophers who alone can interpret Scripture and they would constitute a dangerous ecclesiastical authority; (3) it assumes that the authors of Scripture are in agreement with each other and that they were superior philosophers and theologians which obviously they were not; and (4) it supposes that the sense of Scripture cannot be made plain from Scripture itself, a notion which he has just spent the last hundred pages refuting. Such a view which explains the words of Scripture by preconceived opinions is clearly useless.[54]

Spinoza also refutes the traditions of the Pharisees and the Popes, arguing that on public matters they may have authority, but on individual matters such as the state of blessedness, their authority does not apply.

After a long section in which he deals historically with the various books of the Bible[55] Spinoza comes to a second matter to be cleared up to finalize his argument. It concerns the sense in which Scripture may be called sacred. He defines a thing as sacred insofar as it promotes piety and is used religiously. It follows that nothing is intrinsically

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[54] Ibid., pp. 116-117.

[55] This section does not articulate any new principle of interpretation. It is rather an attempt to apply his principle of history to the books of the Bible. His conclusions do not sound particularly startling to us,(e.g. Moses could not have written the Pentateuch in its present form) but were very important in his day and have had a profound influence.

sacred, or profane for that matter. "Thus", he concludes, "Scripture is sacred, and its word divine so long as it stirs mankind to devotion towards God."[56] This is of course exactly what Scripture does in that it teaches the very simple yet universal doctrine of divine justice and charity and the necessity of man's obedience[57] to what he has grasped by faith.[58]

Lastly, Spinoza clarifies what he considers to be the relationship between theology and reason. He has shown already that Scripture does not teach philosophy, but obedience, and that its contents have been adapted to the understanding and opinions of the popular mind. The realm of theology is the "scheme and manner of obedience or the true dogmas of piety and faith."[59] Reason too has its sphere, that of truth and wisdom. Neither theology nor reason is to serve the other, but each has its domain.[60] It is interesting to note that if theology is rightly doing its task in setting down the precepts of life, these precepts will be in accordance with reason and "in nowise repugnant thereto."[61] Although we cannot deduce from reason the content of Scripture, which makes revelation necessary (for the masses), nevertheless it is reason which allows us to grasp with moral certainty what is revealed.

Thus Spinoza teaches that prophecy (revelation) is an

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56 <u>Theologico-Political Treatise</u>, pp. 167-168.
57 <u>Ibid</u>., p. 177.
58 <u>Ibid</u>., p. 184.
59 <u>Ibid</u>., p. 195.
60 <u>Ibid</u>., p. 194.
61 <u>Ibid</u>., p. 195.

inadequate kind of knowledge. Only by intuition's clear idea can we be sure of our grasp of God. The Bible is a human book which we understand by applying a method of interpretation similar to that applied by science to nature. Such an application to the contents of Scripture yields a moral certainty about the road to piety. Spinoza applies the principle of induction to Scripture and achieves moral truth which still has to be ratified by reason. He applies Descartes' rationalism and achieves a pantheistic monism which allows him to avoid the stubborn particularities of history, and gives him the security of what he considers to be absolute truth, the contemplation of which is the highest good of man.

III. Critique and Influence

This chapter would not be complete without some estimate of Spinoza's worth and influence. There is much on the positive side. His emphasis on the need for an approach to Scripture which would be free from *a priori* assumptions was a necessary and important advance. Reasoning from particulars to universals which we have called in Spinoza's thought "the principle of induction" is essential to any method of interpreting the Bible. That induction led him to study the Scriptures "historically" helped pave the way for modern approaches in biblical study.

Yet we also have some reservations. First, Spinoza, like all men, was unable to step out of time for a perspective free from preunderstanding, though his objective was "to examine

the Bible afresh in a careful, impartial, and unfettered spirit, making no assumptions concerning it, and attributing to it no doctrines which I do not find clearly therein set down."[62] But when he can exclude the possibility of miracle, for example, because such a notion is repugnant to reason, he has clearly smuggled in a presupposition which the biblical authors would not condone. He in fact does make certain assumptions about the Bible as we have seen. There is a second negative comment which is directly related to the first one and that is his belief in the all sufficiency of reason. He seems to have no doubts about reason's capacity to penetrate to reality if the proper method is employed. "By working in this manner", he says with assurance, "everyone will always advance without danger of error...."[63] Here Spinoza seems a true man of his age, with little appreciation for historical and cultural conditioning, or, speaking theologically, sin's corrupting influence on reason, and the resulting elusiveness of truth. It is reason rather than faith guided by the Holy Spirit which leads to a correct interpretation of Scripture. Thirdly, his reduction of the teaching of Scripture to mere piety simply fails to do justice to the contents of Scripture. True piety is certainly taught, but more is taught as well. The central theme of Scripture is not man's religiosity, but God's activity in the affairs

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62 Ibid., p. 8.
63 Ibid., p. 99.

of man. Fourthly, the romantic strain calling the highest good of man the intellectual love of God appears, if not inconsistent, at least unnecessary to his rationalistic system. Fifthly, he falls into some of the same traps of which he accuses Maimonides, namely of imposing rationalistic assumptions on the content of Scripture and of separating the initiated from the uninitiated. The masses have their Scripture and popular preacher, but the sacrament of truth is reserved for the inner circle.[64] Finally, and perhaps most importantly, he shares with his age the comparative lack of appreciation for the idea of history.[65] While he urges the historical study of Scripture, he does not accord to it a high degree of value. Ultimate truth comes by reason. Accordingly, he is severely limited in his understanding of Scripture which describes history as the milieu of God's redeeming activity.

If Spinoza's influence was not great in his own time, it proved to be significant on later generations. People such as Lessing, Herder and Schleiermacher read their Spinoza. Durant remarks that "it was by combining Spinoza with Kant's epistemology that Fichte, Schelling and Hegel reached their varied pantheisms."[66] These various men, and Spinoza through them, provide the roots of certain strands in contemporary biblical interpretation. But before we move to the modern scene, we must first fill in the steps along the way.

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64 Martineau, _op_. _cit_., p. 369.
65 Hampshire, _op_. _cit_., p. 194.
66 Durant, _op_. _cit_., p. 150.

Chapter Fifteen

The Hermeneutics of Pietism: John Wesley

I. Wesley's Preunderstanding

In our effort to assess the role of preunderstanding in representative interpretations of the Bible, we have considered three distinct hermeneutical positions. Origen, in an attempt to reconcile his view of inspiration with what he felt to be offensive passages of Scripture, resorted to the allegorical method. This method, while making the Bible appear more acceptable to his generation, failed for two reasons: unchecked by the tests of the historical method, it inevitably led to artificial interpretations, and it did not do justice to the historical nature of revelation. Luther's christological approach came closer than Origen's allegorical method in meeting the twin demands which we have established as necessary for an adequate interpretation, i.e. the use of the historical method and the presence of the preunderstanding of faith. However it easily led back to the excesses of the allegorical method in its typological understanding of the Old Testament. In Spinoza we found the most important advocate of reason over Scripture and the weight of traditional interpretation. His rationalistic approach rejected the notion that Scripture has authority over the interpreter's mind. The failure of his position lay in its uncritical endorsement of the all sufficiency of reason and its inability to appreciate the

historical dimension of God's self-disclosure.

Not infrequently students who have studied the history of the interpretation of the Bible have found in Spinoza's insistence on the autonomy of reason a natural link with the modern understanding of the Bible, one which certainly had its roots in the age of rationalism but which was more adequately developed in the nineteenth century with the rise of scientific history. Consequently, they have easily passed from rationalistic to critical-historical approaches, ignoring some quite important traditions which lie between and which also make their contribution to contemporary views of the Bible. Two of these traditions, Pietism and Protestant Orthodoxy, we will examine in order to illustrate our theme.[1] We will look first in the present chapter at John Wesley as a representative of the pietistic tradition and then turn to the classical orthodoxy of Charles Spurgeon in Chapter Sixteen.

Pietism, in its post-Puritan expression, had a number of distinctive features. It was a quest for personal holiness and, conversely, a resistance to the compromise with the world on the part of the officially established churches. It was an effort to live the Christian life within the walls of new communities and in patterns of individual response, and thus a sectarian reaction to institutionalism. In part it was an evasion of the theological questions posed by a rationalistic scientific world and a flight into personal piety. But

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[1] One obvious omission from our treatment is Roman Catholic Modernism. See Grant, op. cit., pp. 133-140.

although it may have been an intellectual retreat, it was an evangelistic advance, and from its various expressions sprang a new desire and a concerted effort to win the world for Christ.[2]

In its original form, Pietism was a Lutheran and Reformed movement on the continent. The term first appears in 1689 as a rebuke to Lutheran holiness movements.[3] One of its first representatives was Philipp Jacob Spener (-1705) of Alsace-Lorraine who, in his Pia Desidirea, argued for a converted ministry and an increase in devotional life. The movement grew under the leadership of the founders of "pious colleges" such as August Hermann Francke (-1727) of Halle who established a "little church" within the larger church for those most eager for spiritual growth. Continually frustrated with the official church, harassed by the government and persecuted by fashionable society, Pietism emerged into a powerful force in eighteenth century church life in the Lutheran world.

Reformed Pietism had an easier time of it than its Lutheran counterpart because its moralism was somewhat more congenial to Calvinism and Arminianism. In a time of rationalistic apathy, dedicated Christians pulled together assorted strands of Dutch and English Puritan holiness movements and, combining mysticism with an appeal to the lower classes, developed Pietism into a major movement. One of the most

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2 Marty, op. cit., pp. 291 ff.
3 Ibid., p. 282.

effective efforts was that of the Moravians under Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf(-1760). Influenced by Spener and Francke, wealthy and spiritual, Zinzendorf used his resources and his estate called Herrnhut to build an impressive Pietist community.

Yet no Pietist organization ranks in scope and influence with English Methodism. Under the guidance of John Wesley, Pietism moved from Europe to the fertile soil of England. The prevailing features in English life in the mid-eighteenth century were especially conducive to the Wesleyian form of Pietism. Uninspiring church life, deistic and rationalistic theological thought and poor social and moral conditions all helped to make the masses receptive to Wesley's message.[4] He went to the people, not with philosophy, but with a religious appeal and for Wesley "religion is the most plain, simple thing in the world. It is only, 'we love Him, because He first loved us'."[5] It is this religious appeal which provides the foundation for Wesley's understanding and interpretation of the Bible. But to gain a clearer conception of what the "religious appeal" consisted and how it expressed itself in Wesley's hermeneutical system, we must look briefly at the formative influences in Wesley's life.

John Wesley was born in Epworth, Lincolnshire, on June 17,

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[4] For an account of conditions in Wesley's time see Maldwyn Edwards, John Wesley and the Eighteenth Century, London, 1955.

[5] John Wesley, The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M., London, 1829-31, Vol. ix, p. 466.

1703. His father Samuel was a learned though eccentric and impractical man who served as rector of the church at Epworth. Wesley's mother Susannah was both matriarch and saint and presided with equal grace and firmness over the affairs of the large impoverished family.[6]

Wesley's formal education began in 1714 when he was sent to Charterhouse in London on a scholarship provided by the Duke of Buckingham. Six years later he went up to Oxford and matriculated as a Charterhouse scholar. In spite of the relatively low standards which existed at Oxford at this time, Wesley, with the aid of a few good tutors and disciplined habits, acquired an adequate education.

Up until 1725 Wesley's religious interests were relatively immature. But suddenly, under the right stimulation, his earlier religious training focused into faith and personal commitment. Wesley records his Oxford "conversion" as follows:

> In the year 1725, being in the twenty-third year of my age, I met with Bishop Taylor's <u>Rules and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying</u>. In reading several parts of this book I was exceedingly affected, by that part in particular which related to 'purity of intention.' Instantly I resolved to dedicate <u>all my life</u> to God, <u>all</u> my thoughts and <u>words</u> and actions, being thoroughly convinced there was no medium, but that <u>every</u> part of my life (not <u>some</u> only) must either be a sacrifice to God, or to myself.... In the year 1726 I met with Kempis' <u>Christian Patterns</u>. The nature and extent of <u>inward religion</u>, the religion of the heart, now appeared

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[6] Albert C. Outler, ed., <u>John Wesley</u>, New York, 1964, p. 5. The influence of Susannah Wesley on her son John is traced by G. Elsie Harrison, <u>Son to Susanna</u>, London, 1944.

> to me in a stronger light than ever it had done before. I saw that giving even all my life to God...would profit me nothing unless I gave my heart, yea, all my heart to him.... A year or two later, Mr. Law's Christian Perfection and Serious Call were put into my hands. These convinced me more than ever of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian, and I determined, through his grace...to be all-devoted to God: to give him all my soul, my body and my substance.[7]

By 1725 the significant influences on Wesley's life are evident in his new religious interests. The rich heritage of his home and family, the stimulation of a university environment and religious friends, and the radical demands for utter seriousness in religion as they had been discovered by him in Taylor, Kempis and Law had all combined to teach him that the Christian life is devotio, the unconditional yielding of the whole man in love to God and neighbor.

With this awareness Wesley decided to prepare for the ministry and, in anticipation of ordination, shifted his academic pursuits from the classics to the Bible and Theology. In 1726 he was elected fellow of Lincoln College which established his position in the university, assured him of financial security as long as he remained unmarried and gave him the freedom to pursue his divine calling. He was ordained in 1728.

Except for the time he served as his father's assistant at Epworth (1726 and 1729) Wesley remained at Oxford. When he returned to Oxford from Epworth in the latter part of 1729

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[7] Works, Vol. xi, pp. 366-67. Quoted by Outler, ed., op. cit., p. 7.

he became involved in a semi-monastic group which had been gathered by his brother Charles for the purpose of Bible study, mutual discipline in devotion and frequent communion. To this group, called many things but most frequently "The Methodists", Wesley devoted much of his time and energy.

Also at Oxford, with the help of one of his fellow "Methodists", John Clayton, who was a competent patristics scholar, Wesley began the study of ancient Christian literature. He was especially taken with "Macarius the Egyptian" and Ephraem Syrus. What fascinated him in these men was their description of "perfection" as the goal of the Christian life. This notion became central to Wesley's thinking as he attempted to fuse the Eastern tradition of holiness as disciplined love with the Anglican tradition of holiness as aspiring love.[8]

Yet with all his fervent religious activity, Wesley remained discontented and unsatisfied with his religious life. He rejected the idea of going to Epworth to take over for his father on a permanent basis. But when the opportunity to go to Georgia as a missionary came along, Wesley saw it as his opportunity to serve the Lord and to put some of his ideas into practice. Unfortunately the experience proved to be a fiasco. He was jilted in a love affair, got intangled with the law and fled in two years. The time, however, was not

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[8] Outler, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

a total loss. He continued his studies, particularly in the thought of the Eastern church, and made contact with the Moravians who taught him by example and precept that faith should be fearless and piety joyful. Looking back on the stormy voyage across the Atlantic Wesley recorded in his Journal that

> In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans [the Moravians] calmly sung on.[9]

Such behavior made a lasting impression on Wesley.

He was back in England in the early part of 1738, still unsettled but continuing to search for a coordinating factor which would bring meaning to his religious feelings. The divergent forces at work in his life--Eastern notions of synelthesis (the dynamic interaction betwen God's will and man's), classical Protestantism with its concepts of sola fide and sola scriptura and the Moravian stress upon "inner feeling"--were brought into cohesion in his "Aldersgate experience". The Journal recording on May 24th reads:

> In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through

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[9] John Wesley's Journal, abridged by Percy L. Parker, London, 1902, p. 7.

> faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.[10]

In the summer of 1738 Wesley visited the Moravians in their homeland at Herrnhut and Marianborn. On returning to England he began to preach, believing as Jonathan Edwards had written, that God honors those who preach His word. With some reluctance he accepted in 1741 Whitefield's invitation to preach to the angry mob at Bristol and, to Wesley's surprise, "revival" broke out. These first fruits gave him confidence, and his late starting though long lasting career was launched.

The next fifty years were devoted to preaching, organizing the Methodist Societies, providing literature for his converts, debating with Anglicans, Calvinists, Roman Catholics and Moravians, and developing his own theological system.[11] Few men have travelled farther, preached more and organized better than John Wesley. He died in 1791.

From these few biographical notes on Wesley it is not difficult to reconstruct the essential features of the preunderstanding with which he approaches the Scriptures. It is obvious that faith is the comprehensive preunderstanding with which Wesley comes to the Bible. He believed in the God about whom the biblical authors spoke. But the crucial

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10 Ibid., p. 43.

11 For accounts of Wesley's theology see William Cannon, The Theology of John Wesley, New York, 1946, and Colin Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today, London, 1960.

question is: What are the precise contours of Wesley's faith? What form did his faith take? We will attempt to answer this question by examining Wesley's preunderstanding in terms of its type and function. We will then be in a position to see how his preunderstanding works itself out in the specific presuppositions of his hermeneutical system.

The attitudinal element in Wesley's preunderstanding, reflecting his deeply rooted piety, is an exceedingly important one. Its various components might best be characterized by the term "expectancy". Wesley expected the Bible to speak a poignant word to his personal life and to the lives of all believers who would expose themselves to Scripture. The word which Wesley expected the Bible to speak broke in on the believer in atleast three dimensions: the practical, the pious and the experiential. It was practical in the sense that he believed the Scripture gave specific guidelines for daily living and decision making. It was pious in that he felt that the precepts of the Bible could lead the pilgrim Christian along his way toward holiness. It was experiential in the sense that its proper reading created peace and joy in the believer's heart. On this latter point, it is significant to note that Wesley's own heart had been "strangely warmed", and that the pattern of his religious growth in his formative years jumped from experience to experience. He believed that God the Holy Spirit could use the pages of Scripture to speak directly to the believer, often in the crisis of the moment. This complex of dependent attitudes which we have called

"expectancy" is a major influence on Wesley's handling of Scripture. It tends to be comprehensive in its scope and to function as a conscious if not a wholly rational and consistent element in his hermeneutical system.

The attitudinal part of Wesley's preunderstanding with which he comes to the Bible gives a clear hint of the main ideological content. He conceives the Bible to be the book which leads the man of faith to Christian spirituality. The most important immediate source of this emphasis was the Anglican theological literature in which he steeped himself while at Oxford and in Georgia. This Caroline moral theology, most ably represented by Jeremy Taylor and William Law, had taught Wesley that faith is a serious undertaking. From the great scholars of the seventeenth century revival in partristic studies (William Beveridge and Robert Nelson), he grasped the intimate correlation of Christian doctrine and Christian spirituality. To these shaping forces he added the decisive influence of his continual perusal in the piety and wisdom of the early Christian fathers, Ignatius, Clement, Macarius, Ephraem Syrus and others, and the devotional literature of the Middle Ages, particularly the Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis. Incorporated into this theme of understanding the Bible as the Christian's guide to holy living were the basic presuppositions held by the Reformers regarding Scripture. Wesley assumes that the Bible is authoritative, inspired and that it can be understood. These ideological assumptions

merge into a dependency relationship in Wesley's thought and determine the basic direction of his interpretation of Scripture. Generally they function consistently, consciously and rationally throughout it.

The methodological aspect of Wesley's preunderstanding cannot be easily separated from the attitudinal and ideological aspects. As we will observe, Wesley gives a large place to experience as that which authenticates the interpretation. Yet he is aware that experience, without careful study of the historical and grammatical, can mislead. He attempts, not always consistently, to hold these two emphases in tension, i.e. he tries to allow room for God the Holy Spirit to speak directly to the believer's experience and to faithfully study the Bible in its historical setting and original languages. What is important to note is that he did make a conscious and rational effort to apply a historical methodology, albeit a primitive one, to the study of the Scriptures, and this constitutes a positive influence on his interpretation.

As a final word about Wesley's preunderstanding we would stress his capacity for the synoptic view. His preunderstanding functioned openendedly rather than closed-mindedly. He had an uncanny ability to glimpse the underlying unity of Christian truth as it was expressed in all of its varieties from both the Catholic and Protestant traditions. While assuredly a man of his age and afflicted with its assorted prejudices and superstitions, he was also a man who possessed a universal vision. He was able to fuse "faith and good

works, Scripture and tradition, revelation and reason, God's sovereignity and human freedom, universal redemption and conditional election, Christian liberty and an ordered polity, the assurance of pardon and the risks of "falling from grace", original sin and Christian perfection..."[12] into a reasonably well-ordered theological system.

It is now necessary to examine more closely how his preunderstanding took form in the particular presuppositions of his hermeneutical system. How did Wesley's eyes of faith read, understand and interpret the Bible?

II. Wesley's Interpretation of the Bible

For purposes of clarity we will divide our analysis of the presuppositions undergirding Wesley's handling of the Bible into two sections: his view of the nature of the Bible and his actual interpretation of the Bible, the latter hinging on the former. Each section will then be further divided into five subsections.

Following the tradition of the Reformation doctrine of <u>sola</u> <u>scriptura</u> Wesley viewed the Bible in the first place as the absolute authority in matters of faith and practice. This theme runs throughout all of his teaching and preaching. Neither the united testimony of the ancient fathers and Reformers nor religious experience, ~~as~~ important as these are in Wesley's system, are sufficient to prove a doctrine which is not founded in Scripture.[13] "For," as Wesley says, "as all

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[12] Outler, op. cit., p. viii.

[13] Arthur S. Yates, The Doctrine of Assurance, London, 1952, pp. 105 f.

faith is founded upon divine authority, so there is now no divine authority but the Scriptures; and, therefore, no one can make that to be of divine authority which is not contained in them."[14] In reference to the Roman Catholics, he further asserts "that as long as we have the Scripture, the church is to be referred to the Scriptures, and not the Scriptures to the Church...."[15] The Scripture is sufficient in itself and "neither needs, nor is capable of, any farther addition."[16]

In general Wesley applied the principle of authority equally to all of Scripture and, therefore, quoted indiscriminately from the Old and New Testaments. He moves with freedom over all parts of the Bible in search of evidence to support his points. Every page of Scripture is uniformly precious. If one seems more illuminating than another, the explanation is to be sought in the interpreter's own need or present interest rather than in the Scripture itself.[17] For the most part he is unhindered by critical questions of date, occasion or authorship and finds proof texts as easily from Ezekiel as from Matthew.[18]

Secondly, the Bible derives its authority from its divine inspiration. The biblical authors, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, recorded divine truth. Wesley explains

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[14] Works, Vol. X, p. 91.

[15] Ibid., p. 94.

[16] Ibid., p. 141.

[17] W. E. Sangster, The Path to Perfection, London, 1943, p. 36.

[18] See e.g. John Wesley, A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, Bristol, 1770, p. 40.

the process as follows:

> Concerning the Scriptures in general, it may be observed, the word of the living God, which directed the first Patriarchs also, was, in the time of Moses, committed to writing. To this were added, in several succeeding generations, the inspired writings of the other Prophets. Afterwards, what the Son of God preached, and the Holy Ghost spake by the Apostles, the Apostles and the Evangelists wrote. This is what we now style the Holy Scripture: This is that 'word of God which remaineth for ever;' of which, though 'heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle shall not pass away.'[19]

He also gives us his interesting if not completely convincing "short, clear, and strong argument to prove the divine inspiration of the holy Scriptures." The argument begins with the proposition that "the Bible must be the invention of either good men or angels, bad men or devils, or of God." But it could not be the work of good men or of angels because they neither would nor could write a book in which they would tell lies by prefacing their remarks with "Thus saith the Lord". Nor could it be the invention of bad men or devils since they would not write a book which commands all duty, forbids all sin and condemns their souls to hell in all eternity. Therefore, Wesley concludes, the Bible must be given by divine inspiration.[20]

It follows that if the Scriptures are divinely inspired, they are infallibly true. As Wesley sees it, "if there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand.

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[19] Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, London, 1755, Preface 10.

[20] Works, Vol. xi, p. 484.

If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth."[21] Divine inspiration also insures the quality of the content in the Bible. It is "a most solid and precious system of truth"; "every part is worthy of God"; it is "the fountain of heavenly wisdom"; and the arguments are cogent, the expressions precise and the style above "all the elegances of human composition."[22]

Thirdly, this authoritative and inspired Bible contains the way to holiness and heaven. From his earliest years at Oxford, Wesley had been preoccupied with the notion of Christian holiness or perfection.[23] This concern blossomed into the full-fledged doctrine of "entire sanctification" in the publication of his A Plain Account of Christian Perfection. Wesley believed that in an instant and by a simple act of faith perfection could be "wrought in the soul". This was the second of two distinct stages of the Christian experience of salvation, the first being justification. Without going deeper into this phase of Wesley's teaching, it is enough to point out that Wesley understood the Bible in this context. The Bible was a practical book which led the believer down the path of holy living toward perfection. It was not primarily a textbook of speculative truths or the record of God's revelation in history, but a source book for the development of pious devotion and godly character. And

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21 Journal, London, 1909-1916, Vol. VI, p. 117.

22 Notes on the New Testament, Preface 10-12.

23 John M. Todd, John Wesley and the Catholic Church, London, 1958, p. 13.

ultimately, of course, it contained the directions to heaven. Wesley wrote:

> I want to know one thing--the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God Himself has condescended to teach the way; for this very end he came from Heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me.[24]

As Luther understood the central message of Scripture to be justification by faith in Christ and interpreted the Bible accordingly, so Wesley perceived the primary message to be instructions in true piety and interpreted Scripture in light of this assumption.

Closely aligned to Wesley's devotional understanding of the Bible is a fourth consideration, namely the relationship between religious experience and Scripture. As has already been mentioned Wesley would not allow religious experience to have authority over Scripture, but he did insist that it validated the biblical message. The truth of Scripture is to be verified by Christian experience. God's message in Christ is applied to the human personality by the Holy Spirit, and when this happens in the believer's life the message of Scripture is confirmed. The dead written word has come alive by an act of faith which is more than conceptualization or verbalization but an inner reality of the heart.[25]

Fifthly and finally, in keeping with the Protestant

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[24] Wesley's Standard Sermons, ed. by Edward H. Sugdem, London, 1935, p. 31.

[25] Outler, op. cit., p. 27.

principle of the perspicuity of Scripture, Wesley viewed the Bible as an understandable book, not one whose sacred mysteries could only be penetrated by ecclesiastical officials. Therefore it should be read by all Christians.[26] But the practical streak in Wesley's temperament also made him aware that Scripture needs to be carefully taught to the people, a task to which he devoted his life. Underlining this point he writes: "The Scriptures are clear in all necessary points, and yet their clearness does not prove that they need not be explained."[27]

It was his life-long teaching of the Bible that forced Wesley to ponder the question of its interpretation. Though he never wrote at length on the correct method, he did articulate some guidelines for himself and his followers as the pressures of his responsibilities demanded them. This leads us directly into our first observation regarding Wesley's method of interpretation, namely that it grew out of the practical demands of communicating the message of Scripture to masses of unlearned people, of teaching "plain truth" to "plain people". There was little room in Wesley's mind for a complicated hermeneutical theory. The literal sense of Scripture was sufficient though a "spiritual" sense was also possible. But for the most part "the literal sense of every text is to be taken, if it is not contrary to some

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26 Works, Vol. x, p. 142.

27 Quoted by Yates, op. cit., p. 107.

other texts; but in that case the obscure text is to be interpreted by those which speak more plainly."[28] In his instructions to his fellow Methodist preachers regarding the teaching of the Bible he asks a series of rhetorical questions, one of which is "am I a master of the spiritual sense (as well as the literal) of what I read?"[29] Wesley does not make clear what is meant by "spiritual", but it most likely is a reference to interpreting Scripture in terms of practical piety. It is certainly not a suggestion to interpret the Bible in terms of esoteric and speculative truth. In keeping with his insistence on the obvious and literal sense, Wesley also exhorts his preachers to be acquainted with grammatical constructions, the biblical languages and the context and scope of each book.

Another selection from Wesley's preface to his Standard Sermons gives us a clue to the next three principles of his interpretive method:

> I sit down alone: only God is here. In His presence I open, I read His book.... Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights: 'Lord, is not Thy Word, "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God"? Thou "givest liberally, and upbraidest not"....' I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, "comparing spiritual things with spiritual". I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still

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28 Ibid.

29 Works, Vol. x, p. 490.

> remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, yet they speak. And what I thus learn, that I ever teach.[30]

The first point to note in this passage is the place Wesley gives to the direct guidance of God. Alone in meditation, the interpreter is led by the Spirit of God to the true meaning of the biblical passage. Not infrequently, applying this principle to decision making and stretching it to its breaking point, Wesley would seek divine guidance by a fortuitous opening of the Scriptures, taking the first passage he lit upon as the answer to his query. It was also this kind of direct divine guidance which was given the primacy in Wesley's interpretive method. He writes: "Man's human and worldly wisdom or science is not needful to the understanding of Scripture but the revelation of the Holy Spirit who inspireth the true meaning unto them that with humility and diligence search."[31]

The second principle to glean from the long section quoted above is that Wesley places great confidence in the analogy of faith, i.e. that the central tenets of the Christian faith shed light on the difficult and incidental passages of Scripture. The whole gives meaning to the parts. This involves letting one passage interpret another, for "Scripture is the best expounder of Scripture. The best way, therefore, to understand it, is carefully to compare Scripture with Scripture,

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30 Standard Sermons, pp. 31-32.

31 Outler, op. cit., p. 123.

and thereby learn the true meaning of it."[32] Following Luther, Wesley maintains that those passages of Scripture which contain the essence of the gospel and therefore throw the most light on the rest are Paul's Epistles to the Romans and Galations.[33]

Still a third principle alluded to by Wesley in his summary statement of how he determines the meaning of Scripture is the consultation "of those experienced in the things of God." Wesley had great respect for the church fathers, the leaders of the Reformation and biblical scholars of his own time. He did not hesitate, in difficult passages, to compare his own views with what others had written. In the preface to his Works he pays tribute to the tradition of the church when he writes that "in this edition, I present to serious and candid men my last and maturest thoughts: agreeable, I hope, to Scripture, Reason, and Christian Antiquity."[34] Bearing in mind that Scripture was his supreme authority and reason the authority of his age, "Christian Antiquity" is given a high place of authority in Wesley's system.

There is one final matter to mention in our discussion of Wesley's hermeneutical method and that is his willingness to make use of what critical tools were available to him. He was a first-rate Greek scholar and was not adverse to correcting the text of the Authorized Version. He states in the

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32 Works, Vol. x, pp. 92, 142, 482.
33 Outler, op. cit., p. 123.
34 Quoted by Sangster, op. cit., p. 33.

opening section of Explanatory Notes on the New Testament his procedure:

> I design, first, to set down the text itself, for the most part, in the common English translation, which is,...the best that I have seen. Yet I do not say it is incapable of being brought, in several places, nearer to the original. Neither will I affirm that the Greek copies from which this translation was made are always the most correct: and therefore I shall take liberty...to make here and there a small alteration.[35]

Nor was he blind to or happy with the theological and practical implications of some of the Psalms. In drawing up the Sunday services for American Methodism he omitted many of them on the grounds that they were "highly improper for the mouths of a Christian congregation."[36] How far Wesley would have allowed a critical historical understanding of the Bible to influence his views had he lived in the modern era, one can only conjecture. But at least it appears that in principle he would not have completely rejected such an approach.

III. An Assessment

It would be easy to underestimate the value of the more distinctive features of the pietistic approach to the Bible as we have examined them in the writings of John Wesley. Religious "experience", in an age where all of man's inner life is exposed to intense psychological scrutiny, is bound to be a little bit suspect. Few these days would be prepared

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35 Notes on the New Testament, Preface, 4.
36 Works, Vol. xiv, p. 317.

to accept the testimony of one who claims to have a direct "pipeline" to God. Yet perhaps there may be some truth in the Pietist claim that the Bible's message only has value when it becomes personal in the believer's life. Where this emphasis is balanced with a healthy respect for historical exegesis, it will not necessarily mean a distortion of the biblical message. Perhaps one avenue of true understanding of the Bible is an internal sensitivity and openness to its message. Is this not what the Pietist-influenced Schleiermacher emphasized a few decades after Wesley in his divinitory method, and what Dilthey in the late nineteenth century and Bultmann in our time have stressed, though in different language? This is in fact what we have argued all along. The Bible cannot be adequately interpreted and its message rightly understood without the preunderstanding of faith. And faith is, among other things, an attitude of affinity which is able to receive and identify with the message of Scripture. It is this aspect of Wesley's hermeneutical position which has lasting value.

But where Wesley fails (and here we do not judge him too harshly because he lived in an age which neither understood the historical method nor appreciated the value of history) is in his non-historical understanding of the Bible. As such, it was only his intuitive good sense, Christian character, knowledge of the traditional interpretation of the church and scholar's desire for truth which gave his interpretations

their balance. It is true that Wesley was not uncritical of the Bible in his own primitive and limited way, carefully examining the text and exhorting his co-workers to know their Greek and Hebrew and something of the historical context of the books of the Bible. But on principle he could have been far wide of the mark. Believing as he did that Scripture is divinely inspired and uniformly authoritative and that the Holy Spirit guides the interpreter to the correct view, he might easily have imposed onto the words of Scripture almost any meaning that his own preunderstanding and desires dictated. As it was, his chief sin was pulling verses out of context either for the purpose of effective homiletics or to support his favorite doctrines. In so doing he may have missed the essential meaning of several passages, but he was neither the first nor the last to commit this error. Fortunately, Wesley's preunderstanding was working for him rather than against him, and flagrant interpretive violations of the intent of Scripture are the exception rather than the rule in his work. A lesser man than Wesley, however, employing the same hermeneutical principles, and unchecked in his interpretation of the Bible by the application of the historical method, might miss the meaning of Scripture altogether. Adequate biblical interpretation requires not only the preunderstanding of faith but also the study of history.

Chapter Sixteen

The Bible in Protestant Orthodoxy

Charles H. Spurgeon

I. Spurgeon's Heritage

Protestant Orthodoxy is a direct descendant of the Reformation. More than Luther or Zwingli, its patron saint is John Calvin. It was Calvin's theological system with its extremely high view of Scripture as the deposit of the apostolic tradition which formed the cornerstone of orthodoxy's understanding of the faith. Second to Luther in his depth-perception of the Bible, Calvin was superior in his systematization of its teachings. In Calvin, theories regarding the inspiration of the biblical documents began to appear which opened the door for the static conceptions of God's revelation which were characteristic of the Protestant scholastics of the seventeenth century. These seventeenth century divines found in Calvin a source book for their doctrine of verbal inspiration. His legal mind needed a codebook, a document, a systematic statement of God's revelation to man, and he found it in Scripture. The writers of Scripture were "amanuenses", "penmen", "clerks". "The Holy Spirit dictated to the prophets and apostles", he wrote in his commentary on Jeremiah.[1]

It should be remembered in fairness to Calvin that in

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[1] Quoted by Marty, op. cit., p. 225.

the days which preceded the historical and literary analysis of the Bible, such assertions did not lead to the complications they would today. It should also be noted that the later generations of theologians who hardened Calvin's views into dogmatic categories did not do justice to the reformer's own witness to the human dimension of the revelation in the Bible. As we observed in Luther, so there is in Calvin as well a responsible respect for biblical authority, but this was accompanied by a freedom of interpretation which allowed him to question the text and to see a superior value in the New Testament where God's redeeming activity was more explicit in his once-and-for-all revelation in Jesus Christ. From the Old Testament to the New Testament there was an increasingly explicit view of revelation, from the hint in the promise to Adam to the open declaration at Calvary.

Calvin's heirs were not as balanced in their views.[2] The sense of liberty in interpreting the text was replaced by a dogmatic tradition and an air-tight doctrinal system. The reverence for Scripture was superseded by the doctrine of verbal inerrancy and a rigidity in interpretation. Uniformity took the place of living thought and originality. The arbitrary tradition which the reformers had torn away reappeared in a new form. Once again the Bible began to be read through the eyes of elaborate theological formulations. The "analogy of faith" was distorted into a method of proof-

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[2] See Farrar, op. cit., pp. 357 ff.

texting, and the Spirit's guidance in the interpretive process was claimed in support of one's own position. Rarely was an interpretation subject to the check of historical scrutiny. The word of God was identified with Scripture, and few bothered to distinguish between Scripture and their interpretation of Scripture.

The impulse toward the notion of verbal inerrancy was motivated by the need for a decisive oracle in the endless theological disputes which were characteristic of the era. The ~~natural~~ vacuum of authority which was created when papal infallibility was set aside was abhorred and quickly filled by the doctrine of an infallible Bible. The assumption was made that the Bible was a homogeneous, self-interpreting and verbally dictated whole, and that inferences drawn from it by dialectics and framed into theological propositions were as certain and sacred as the text itself. Ultimately the authority of Scripture was impaired by a defensive overstatement of its infallibility and by not allowing it to turn back and judge the theological structures erected from it.

Because the Bible, both the Old and the New Testament, was seen as revelation itself, not the attestation to revelation, historical questions regarding the genuineness and integrity of the text were ignored. The Bible was inspired equally throughout. In the *Formula Consensus Helvetica* of 1675 the assertion was made that even the vowel points of the Hebrew text were inspired. This mechanical artificiality made true exegesis impossible. The text was so well defended

by dogma that it could not be approached and its essential meaning was missed.

The English representatives of Protestant Orthodoxy in the seventeenth century were the Puritans whose maximum influence in English religious life extended from 1560 until 1688 and reached its peak between 1640 and 1660 with their control of government under Oliver Cromwell. The Puritan movement began initially as an effort to reform the Church of England and check all tendencies of movement toward Rome. Their efforts at reform were not wholly unsuccessful, but by 1662 their irritating pleas and programs for legislation in every area of life ceased to be appreciated and they were ejected from the State Church. As a result, the Puritans were classified along with the Separatist movement (Independents, Presbyterians, Baptists, etc.) as Nonconformists.

The Puritan movement was steeped in Reformed theology, and produced the historic Westminster Confession of Faith and innumerable volumes of dogmatics. The foundation of their confession and theological system was the assertion that the Bible was the very voice and message of God to man. It was the infallibly inspired work of the Holy Spirit and authoritative in all matters, including not only doctrine, worship and church government but also civil and political problems, daily work, home life, dress, recreation and duty. The Puritans surveyed the whole gamut of life in light of the Bible and attempted to live accordingly. The literal word of Scripture was a direct message from God spoken as much in

the present as in the past.

The eighteenth century in both England and on the Continent brought a number of challenges to the rigidity and sterility within Protestant Orthodoxy. Arminius reasserted the importance of human freedom and responsibility and the Pietists argued for the validity of religious experience. Exhausted by religious wars and disputations, the countries of Europe expressed a general appeal for tolerance. Rationalistic philosophy turned its attack on the religious establishment with telling force, and arising out of rationalism were the beginnings of biblical criticism. But the orthodox tradition had commanded a strong allegiance from the people and would not be easily edged out. Although across the years it has adjusted to circumstances, retreated from critical problems and borrowed from the pietism of the Evangelical Revivals, its essential position remains intact, and it continues as a major force in the life of the church today.[3]

Charles Hadden Spurgeon can best be understood as a nineteenth century representative of Protestant Orthodoxy, and more particularly of the Puritans. His most recent biographer (who incidently thinks a great deal of the Puritans) writes that Spurgeon "was completely moulded and fashioned by those spiritual giants of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Puritans. He stood in their noble tradition, in the direct line of their theology and outlook, and can

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[3] See Louis Gasper, <u>The Fundamentalist Movement</u>, Paris, 1963.

without question be called the heir of the Puritans."[4] Spurgeon himself, who had 7000 books in his library by or about the Puritans, wrote: "We assert this day that, when we take down a volume of Puritan theology, we find in a solitary page more thinking and more learning, more Scripture, more real teaching, than in whole folios of the effusion of modern thought. The modern men would be rich if they possessed even the crumbs that fall from the table of the Puritans."[5] In order to better understand the influence of the Puritan tradition on the formation of the preunderstanding which Spurgeon brings to his interpretation of the Bible, it is necessary to look briefly at the course of his life.

Spurgeon was born on June 19, 1834 in Kelvedon, Essex to a sturdy, lower-middle class family which had had Nonconformist sympathies for generations.[6] When Charles was born, his father, John Spurgeon, was a clerk in a coal yard, but also found time to be honorary pastor of an Independent (or Congregational) Church at Tollesbury. There he preached with conviction the Calvinistic doctrines as he understood them. Spurgeon's mother was a deeply religious woman who conscientiously guided her children in the faith. Financial

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4 Ernest W. Bacon, Spurgeon: Heir of the Puritans, London, 1967, p. 102.

5 Ibid., p. 120.

6 For sympathetic treatments of Spurgeon's life in addition to Bacon, see J. C. Carlile, C. H. Spurgeon, London, 1933; and W. Y. Fullerton, C. H. Spurgeon, London, 1920. I follow Bacon's account.

difficulties necessitated sending Charles to live with his grandparents early in his life. His grandfather was a pastor in an Independent Chapel in Stambourne, and his grandmother and aunt were dedicated to caring for the spiritual welfare of the young boy.

Spurgeon's early education began at a nursery school in Colchester where his parents had moved. Later he attended a day school run by a Mr. Henry Lewis. At fourteen he was sent to All Saints Agricultural College, not because he wanted to be a farmer, but because his uncle was a tutor there.

During this time Spurgeon became an avid reader, a habit he was to continue throughout his life. In addition to reading Shakespeare, Milton, Defoe and others he gained an initial acquaintance with Puritan literature. In his fifteenth year he read Baxter's <u>Call to the Unconverted</u>, James' <u>Anxious Enquirer</u>, Foxe's <u>Book of Martyrs</u>, Doddridge's <u>Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul</u> and Scougal's <u>The Life of God in the Soul of Man</u>.

Toward the end of his fifteenth year Spurgeon was sent up to Newmarket, Cambridgeshire to become a pupil in the school of Mr. John Swindell. There he studied Greek, Latin and philosophy, assisted in the training of younger children and was exposed to the environment of the University.

While in Cambridge Spurgeon became spiritually unsettled. He began to question the adequacy of his own relationship with God, was "keenly aware of his sin" and struggled with

doubts about the truth of many Christian affirmations. On January 6, 1850, unable to get to the church of his destination because of heavy snow, he stumbled into a Methodist Chapel. There was a very small congregation and the regular minister was not preaching because he had been detained by the snowstorm. A layman in the congregation preached on the text "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 45:22). The message struck home and Spurgeon was converted. He writes concerning this incident:

> The cloud was gone, the darkness rolled away, and in that moment I saw the sun. I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard the word LOOK, I could almost have looked my eyes away. I could have risen that instant, and sung with the most enthusiastic of them of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith that looks alone to Him. I thought I could dance all the way home. I could understand what John Bunyan meant when he declared he wanted to tell all the crows of the ploughed land about his conversion.... Between half past ten, when I entered the chapel and half past twelve, when I returned home, what a change had taken place in me.[7]

Soon after his conversion, Spurgeon was baptized in a Baptist church because of his convictions regarding believer's baptism. He began to study his Bible in earnest and felt called to the ministry. His first sermon was preached in Waterbeach while he was still sixteen years old, and it was such a success he was invited to be their pastor. The small church grew under his leadership and his fame as a boy

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7 Bacon, op. cit., p. 24.

preacher spread. In the summer of 1853 he was invited to speak at the annual meeting of the Cambridge Sunday School Union. A member of the New Park Street Baptist Chapel in London heard him and was impressed enough to invite him to be a candidate for their vacant pulpit. In March of 1854 at nineteen years of age he was called to this large and historic but failing church.

In a short time Spurgeon's preaching attracted large crowds of people and his preaching career was underway. The 1200 seat auditorium of the New Park Street Church was soon overflowing and a building program was launched. In March of 1861 the Metropolitan Tabernacle was completed with a seating capacity of 5000. Sunday after Sunday, year after year, eager worshippers crowded the auditorium to capacity.[8]

In addition to his preaching and pastoral responsibilities Spurgeon found time for a number of other activities. He was instrumental in founding a pastor's training college and an orphanage. Often he would lecture in the college on the Puritans or the Christian classics or homiletics. Always in demand to fill other pulipts, he preached in Scotland and Ireland and many parts of England. He was a prolific writer, publishing 135 volumes and editing another 28. The intense pace of life which Spurgeon sustained took its toll on his health and he died in January of 1892 at the age of 57.

Having briefly outlined Spurgeon's heritage and life we

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[8] *Ibid.*, p. 50.

must now state more precisely the main features of his preunderstanding in order to measure its influence upon his interpretation of the Bible. Spurgeon, like most of the thinkers we have already considered, the exceptions being Gibbon and Spinoza, stands within Christian faith. He assumes the truth of the biblical testimony regarding God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Faith is the ground of Spurgeon's preunderstanding. Again our concern is with the form which his faith takes.

Of supreme importance to the ideological component of his preunderstanding was his adherence to the main tenets of the Puritans. He seldom questioned the categories in the Post-Calvinistic theology of seventeenth century Protestant scholasticism.[9] The Bible was inspired and authoritative. God was sovereign in creation, providence and redemption. Christ the Son of God was sinful man's substitute in his atoning sacrifice at Calvary and man is justified by faith in this deed. The Holy Spirit is active in the lives of the saints guiding them in holy living, and ultimately they will persevere until the return of Christ. These mutually dependent Puritan assumptions which Spurgeon adopts constitute the major influence on his interpretation of Scripture. Taken as a whole they tend toward being a comprehensive world view and function consistently, consciously, rationally and somewhat closed-mindedly throughout his hermeneutical system.

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9 The one exception was his insistence on believer's baptism.

Of hardly less importance than Puritan theology in the formation of Spurgeon's preunderstanding, especially the attitudinal aspect, was the pietism of the Evangelical Revivals which had been assimilated by the Nonconformist movement and accommodated by Spurgeon to the ideals of the Victorian era. The fusion of Pietistic, Nonconformist and Victorian attitudes produced a mentality that was experience-centered and conversionist in outlook. It was inclined toward anti-intellectualism and was usually at war with science and culture. It tended to identify holiness with the avoidance of certain activities and the ability to sustain intense religious feeling. The Bible, as we shall explore shortly, was a magic book, a veritable object of worship, able to answer all questions and meet every need. The person of Jesus Christ was often described in heroic and romantic superlatives appropriate to Victorian tastes and values. On this point, it is important to note that Spurgeon in many ways epitomized the Victorian value-system, its speech and its manner of life. He was a romantic; he appreciated wealth and elegance; and he spoke in flowery language. In regard to the Nonconformist tradition, Spurgeon's own family background and conversion dove-tailed with it, and he constantly referred back to his early experiences in support of his position. Hence Spurgeon came to the Bible with his Puritan theology heavily infused with the attitudes produced by the synthesis of Pietism, Nonconformism and Victorianism. Not

always consistent, conscious or rational, these attitudes nevertheless function as another major influence on his biblical interpretation.

The methodological assumptions which Spurgeon brings to the hermeneutical task are drawn primarily from three sources. There is first of all the various Reformation themes inherent in the Puritan tradition such as the literal-historical interpretation, christocentric "spiritualizing" and the analogy of faith. There is, secondly, the Pietist theme of experience which we find expressed in Spurgeon in his doctrine of illumination. Finally we mention Spurgeon's pressing responsibilities as a preacher and pastor. Like Wesley, Spurgeon's fundamental task was one of communication to people of all levels of feeling and intelligence. Of necessity he had to speak on the level at which he could be understood. Inevitably this demand influenced the manner in which he approached the Bible. All of these various methodological strands exert a strong influence on his interpretation of Scripture and tend to operate consciously though not always consistently in his exegesis.

We must now turn our attention to how Spurgeon's preunderstanding, rooted in faith, but given its distinctive mold by Puritan theology, Pietist, Nonconformist and Victorian attitudes, and an eclectic methodology, comes to expression in the particular presuppositions of his approach to the Bible.

II. Spurgeon and the Bible

Spurgeon understands the nature of the Bible primarily in light of his Protestant Orthodox heritage. It is the inspired and infallible Word of God, the very words of God, revelation itself. "This volume," he writes, "is the writing of the living God: each letter was penned with an almighty finger; each word in it dropped from the everlasting lips; each sentence was dictated by the Holy Spirit."[10] Therefore it is absolutely inerrant, trustworthy and reliable. "This is the book untainted by any error; but is pure, unalloyed, perfect truth. Why? Because God wrote it."[11]

Spurgeon marshalls a number of arguments to support his view of inspiration not the least of which is that the Scripture claims such inspiration for itself. Moreover, it has a grandeur of style which is above that of any mortal writing. The subjects upon which Scripture speaks are beyond the human intellect; they have a singular majesty and power in them which is evident when the Word is preached. Further, there is a marvelous omniscience in Scripture which is perceived by us when it unveils our inmost souls. It proves itself to be true in our experience. The writers of Scripture are honest in an uncanny way, revealing their own faults. Throughout the Bible there is an amazing unity of subject and the message of Scripture has a master simplicity. Finally, the witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts

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[10] The New Park Street Pulpit, London, 1855, Vol. I, p. 110.

[11] Ibid., p. 112.

confirms our faith in Holy Scripture.[12]

Such a high view of inspiration is necessary to secure our knowledge of God and His redemptive work in Christ. Without it, we would be lost. Those who do not hold this view have turned away from the faith. He writes in the preface to L. Gaussen's Theopneustica: The Plenary Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures which he re-issued for his students in the pastor's training college that

> The turning-point in the battle between those who hold the 'faith once delivered to the saints' and their opponents lies in the true and real inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. If we have in the Word of God no infallible standard of truth, we are at sea without a compass... We can have a measure of fellowship with a mistaken friend who is willing to bow before the teaching of Scripture if he can be made to understand it; but we must part company altogether with the errorist who overrides prophets and apostles, and practically regards his own inspiration as superior to theirs. We fear that such a man will before long prove himself to be an enemy of the cross of Christ, all the more dangerous because he will profess loyalty to the Lord whom he dishonors.[13]

Perhaps intuitively aware of some of the difficulties the text itself presents for such a view, Spurgeon acknowledges that

> the Lord, in His Word, often uses language which, though it be infallibly true in its meaning, is not after the knowledge of God, but according to the manner of men. I mean this, that the Word uses similies and analogies of which we may

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[12] Ibid., p. 110. See also Spurgeon, My Sermon Notes, London, 1887, Part IV, p. 399.

[13] Quoted by Bacon, op. cit., p. 110.

> say that they speak humanly, and not according to the absolute truth as God sees it. As men conversing with babes use their broken speech, so doth the condescending Word.[14]

Because Scripture is the inspired Word of God, it follows that it is authoritative in all issues of religion and life.[15] Its power overrides all the words of men. "Never book spake like this Book; its voice, being the voice of God, is powerful and full of majesty." Further "the Word is right, and we are wrong, wherein we agree not with it. The teachings of God's Word are infallible, and must be reverenced as such."[16]

Still in keeping with the Reformed tradition of Protestant Orthodoxy, Spurgeon also argues for the perspicuity of Scripture. The Bible is an understandable book and should be read and studied by all believers. Every Christian, as he is guided by the Holy Spirit, can comprehend in its pages all that is necessary for holy living and salvation. As Spurgeon expresses it, the Bible "speaks the language of men."[17]

This leads to a related point, namely that the Scripture gives direction in every area of human activity. It is a practical book, "our sweet companion"[18] in the daily round of life. From reading the Scripture the believer will be strengthened to face every challenge and temptation, will be lifted out of doubt and despair, and will be able to

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14 Messages to the Multitudes, London, 1892, pp. 43-44.

15 Carlile, op. cit., pp. 145 f.

16 Messages to the Multitudes, pp. 34, 47.

17 Ibid., p. 43.

18 Ibid., p. 33.

detect theological error and gain confidence in his own position.[19] Says Spurgeon: "The Word of God, as an infallible director for human life, should be sought unto by us, and it will lead us in the highway of safety."[20]

The most important message which the Bible contains is the story of salvation by faith in Christ. The Bible is a book which speaks of Christ on nearly every page and to catch a glimpse of him is to be transformed. Spurgeon writes:

> Jesus, the Sinner's Friend, walks in the avenues of Scripture as once He traversed the plains and hills of Palestine; you can see Him still, if you have opened eyes, in the ancient prophecies; you can behold Him more clearly in the four Gospels; He opens and lays bare His inmost soul to you in the Epistles, and makes you hear the footsteps of His approaching advent in the symbols of the apocalypse. The living Christ is in the Book; you behold His face almost in every page; and, consequently, it is a book that can talk.[21]

Still another aspect of his understanding of the nature of the Bible is its elevation to the place of the sacred. Because it enshrines the words of God and the living heart of Christ it becomes an object of worship. It is essential to our eternal welfare as the mediator of God's saving word. As such it functions as a visible symbol of our salvation. Its words evoke religious sentiments and devotional impulses. Frequently the issue is not so much their understanding as their ritualistic reiteration. Certain phrases, from the King James Version, repeated over and over again,

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19 The Park Street Pulpit, London, 1859, Vol. IV, pp. 60 f.

20 Messages to the Multitudes, p. 32.

21 Ibid., p. 35.

carry the full force of sacred tradition and "bless the soul". Spurgeon writes that it is "blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until at last you come to talk in Scriptural language; and your spirit is flavoured with the words of the Lord, so that your blood is Bibline, and the very essence of the Bible flows from you."[22]

Such statements are more than poetic expression of the value of the Bible to the Christian community. The Bible's place in Spurgeon's thought is in many ways analogous to that of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin in some forms of Roman Catholicism. Like the Virgin, the Bible is the living symbol and mediator of our salvation; and like her freedom from all contagion of human imperfection, the Bible has the qualities of purity and perfection.[23] " O Bible", Spurgeon says in almost prayerful tones, "it cannot be said of any other book, that it is perfect and pure: but of thee we can declare all wisdom is gathered up in thee, without a particle of folly."[24] In words that come close to bibliolatry, Spurgeon exhorts us "to love the Word of God with all our heart, and mind, and soul, and strength; with the full force of our nature we are to embrace it; all our warmest affections are to be bound up with it."[25]

Thus Spurgeon views the Bible as the inspired and authoritative Word of God which believers are able to read with

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22 Quoted by Bacon, op. cit., p. 109.
23 See James Barr, Old and New in Interpretation, p. 204.
24 The New Park Street Pulpit, Vol. I, p. 112.
25 Messages to the Multitudes, pp. 31-32.

understanding as they seek direction for holy living and salvation. Because its words are the words of God and its essential message the living Christ himself, it should be reverenced and loved. But how is this sacred book to be interpreted? What means should be utilized in order to best understand its life-giving content? Spurgeon suggests at least five guidelines for correct interpretation.

Rule number one, according to Spurgeon, is to understand each passage in its "first sense", i.e. its literal or obvious meaning. "The first sense of the passage", he writes, "must never be drowned in the outflow of your imagination; it must be distinctly declared and allowed to hold the first rank; your accommodation of it must never thrust out the original and native meaning, or even push it into the background."[26] A passage should not be strained. One should be honest with the Word, avoiding any perversion.[27] Spurgeon himself interpreted the text quite literally. He took its promises at their face value and used them in his personal prayer life and his preaching. He understood the early chapters of Genesis as describing "what actually happened" and resisted the inroads of science which called for re-evaluation of the traditional view. He says: "When men will not receive the Scripture testimony concerning God's creation, straightway they begin to form theories that are a thousand

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[26] Lectures to My Students, London, 1881, First Series, p. 108.

[27] Commenting and Commentaries, London, 1876, p. 30.

times more ridiculous than they have endeavoured to make the Bible account of it."[28] In another context discussing the same subject he writes: "What is science? Another name for the ignorance of man."[29] To say that Spurgeon insisted that primary attention should be given to the literal sense does not imply that he accepted a critical historical approach to Scripture. He does acknowledge the need to study the historical situation in which a book was written, the context in which a particular text may appear and the author's intent in writing, but would never allow for any critical questions to threaten the seamless garment of Scripture. To the would-be critic he throws out the taunt: "But this is the Word of God; come, search ye critics, and find a flaw; examine it from its Genesis to its Revelation, and find error."[30]

Nor does a commitment to the primacy of the literal sense disallow "spiritualizing". As a second guideline for the interpretation of Scripture, Spurgeon describes the method and application of a "spiritual" hermeneutic. Much of what he says on this point is said in the context of lectures on homiletics to his students. Preachers, as they prepare their sermons, should interpret the Scripture with reference to the spiritual meaning. "Within limit, my brethren," he says to young preachers, "be not afraid to spiritualize, or to take singular texts. Continue to look out passages of Scripture, and not only give their plain meaning, as you

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28 _The New Park Street Pulpit_, Vol. IV, p. 59.

29 _Messages to the Multitudes_, p. 286.

30 _The New Park Street Pulpit_, Vol. I, p. 111.

are bound to do, but also draw from them meanings which may not lie upon their surface."[31] The content of the sermons, he cautions, must always be congruous to the text, but this should not limit a wise utilization of spiritualizing. He writes:

> The discourse should spring out of the text as a rule, and the more evidently it does so the better; but at all times, to say the least, it should have a very close relationship thereto. In the matter of spiritualizing and accommodation very large latitude is to be allowed; but liberty must not degenerate into license, and there must always be a connection, and something more than a remote connection--a real relationship between the sermon and the text.[32]

In order to prevent liberty from degenerating into license, Spurgeon defines the legitimate range for spiritualizing. In the Old Testament, the best application of the principle is in typology. The experiences of the Israelites from the Exodus to the Exile provides a rich and fertile crop from which to harvest "spiritual" lessons concerning Christ and the believer's life. The spiritual principle can be applied to any part of Scripture in the form of metaphors and allegories. Still another manner of spiritualizing is to generalize from minute and separate facts the great universal principles of the faith. From an isolated and ignored text, the interpreter, if he exercises his creative imagination, can draw out a profound truth. Also, "the parables of our Lord in

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31 Lectures to My Students, First Series, p. 103.
32 Ibid., p. 74.

their expounding and enforcement afford the amplest scope for a matured and disciplined fancy, and if these have all passed before you, the miracles still remain, rich in symbolical teaching."[33] Spurgeon seems to have no qualms about using the text itself as a pretext for making a larger and more significant point. This is justified because of the "sacred" character of Scripture which gives it the power of speaking at different levels.

A third guiding concept in the interpretation of Scripture is the analogy of faith. Scripture is to be interpreted in terms of its central message. The whole is to interpret the part, a key passage an incidental one. "No one text", Spurgeon explains, "is to be exalted above the plain analogy of faith; and no solitary expression is to shape our theology for us."[34] Because the essential content of Scripture is Jesus Christ, the <u>analogia</u> <u>fidei</u> leads to a christocentric interpretation. Spurgeon finds references to Christ throughout Scripture. A noteable example of his christocentric interpretation is his acceptance of the traditional interpretation of the Song of Solomon. This Hebrew love poem is understood by Spurgeon as an allegory of Christ's love for the church and more personally as an account of the believer's love relationship with his Lord. In pious sentiment and Victorian language, he draws three lessons from the text "I am the Rose of Sharon,

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33 Ibid., p. 110.
34 Commenting and the Commentaries, p. 31.

and the Lily of the Valleys" (Song of Solomon 2:1): (1) The Exceeding Delightfulness of our Lord, (2) The Sweet Variety of His Delightfulness, and (3) The Exceeding Freedom of His Delightfulness.[35]

A fourth principle of biblical interpretation is the need for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The faithful believer who is open to the Spirit's illuminating power, will be led not only to a correct understanding of Scripture, but also to its living relevance. "As for believers", he writes, "the Holy Spirit often sets the Word on a blaze while they are studying it. The letters were at one time before us as mere letters; but the Holy Ghost suddenly came upon them, and they spake with tongues.... God the Holy Spirit vivifies the letter with His presence, and then it is to us a living Word indeed."[36] It is the Spirit of God who "delights to open up the Word to those who seek his instruction."[37]

Finally we call attention to a fifth principle in Spurgeon's hermeneutical approach which we might call the pragmatic test. An interpretation of a passage will be confirmed as true if it produces results. He applied this notion both to the individual believer and to the preacher. The Christian will find a Scriptural interpretation to be true if it works in his experience, i.e. if it safely guides him through the trials and temptations of life. The preacher will discover

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35 My Sermon Notes, Part II, p. 204.
36 Messages to the Multitudes, p. 36.
37 Commenting and the Commentaries, p. 32.

an interpretation of a text authenticating itself if it produces certain affects in the congregation. If it is a correct interpretation people will be converted and lives will be changed. When the Bible is rightly and sincerely preached and received it carries its own illumination and power.[38]

III. A Critical Appraisal

As has been the case with all of the interpreters we have considered thus far, so it is also with Spurgeon that his preunderstanding had both a positive and negative influence on his interpretation. On the positive side, we note Spurgeon's insistence on giving primacy to the literal-historical meaning in an interpretation. While not always consistent in applying this principle, he did keep it central in his exegesis and was thus able to do justice to the text. A related positive point is his continual stress on the need to understand the background of each book of the Bible and the specific context of each passage to be interpreted.

Moreover we would mention the place given to the Bible and its central message in his preaching. If God has allowed Himself to be known in history and uniquely so in the Christ-event, and if the Bible is the record of this disclosure, then the Bible should be given the place of priority in the preaching of the church. Spurgeon's preaching was always biblical and Christ-centered. Though many may disagree

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[38] Carlile, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

with his view of the nature and interpretation of the Bible, few would question that he sincerely and eloquently proclaimed its central message.

Finally, we call attention to the place which he gave to faith as the necessary preunderstanding for a true comprehension of the Bible. Only the man of faith as he is guided by the Holy Spirit is able to correctly interpret Scripture, which is to say that only the man of faith whose heart is open is able to receive the biblical message. He alone is able to perceive God's love. The man who stands outside of faith may possess information about the contents of the Bible, but he will miss its essential message. He does not "know" God by faith in Jesus Christ.

Yet these positive features which characterize Spurgeon's understanding of the Bible should not mislead us concerning its overall adequacy. His position fails for a number of reasons. Perhaps the primary weakness of his view is his elevation of the Bible to an object of worship. In addition to faith in Jesus Christ, the Christian must also have faith in the Book. Faith has taken on another object and in the process faces the possibility of being corrupted. There is for example the potential danger of focusing exclusive attention upon the statements of Scripture themselves rather than upon their subject. The door has been opened to pronouncing the words sacred as well as that to which they point. In such a view, revelation begins to lose its historical rootage. It becomes propositional. God has

dictated a book and it assumes more importance than His redemptive activity in history.

And of course the sacred book cannot be subjected to historical criticism. There is no need. It is infallible. Its authors were not adversely affected by their historical circumstances. God spoke through their personalities and situations to insure the inerrancy of His Word. Hence the dogma of verbal inspiration resists historical scrutiny. But such a view is surely a retreat from the modern era, an escape from all that is sound in biblical scholarship. How is it possible to understand the Bible at all if one does not begin with its historical study? Critical questions cannot be ignored. To do so is really to affirm that the message of the Bible is unimportant. The historical method is the only way we have of understanding what has happened in the past. If faith affirms that God has acted in the past, then it is a violation of faith not to study in the most thorough and accurate way possible the records of this activity. The doctrine of verbal inspiration is really self-defeating because it does not allow honest historical study of the very historical events which it claims the Bible infallibly records. How is it possible to understand history without studying history? Surely what happened is important and if there is confidence that it did happen, what is there to fear from historical investigation?

This general lack of a historical understanding of the Bible leads Spurgeon to accept principles of interpretation

which falsify the meaning of Scripture. This does not imply that he intentionally distorts the Bible's meaning nor that he misses the sense of most of its passages and fails to comprehend its basic message. It does mean, however, that when he "spiritualizes" a passage, he obscures the original intention of the author and fails to state its primary meaning. We would not exclude in principle the possibility of messianic prophecy nor a christological interpretation of certain Old Testament passages, but would insist on the importance of historical study in determining the primary meaning of all Scripture. The application of the historical method, we would repeat, does not prohibit the preunderstanding of faith, but is necessary as a check on the intruding biases which every interpreter possesses because of the limitations which are imposed upon him by his own historical situation.

Spurgeon's principle of the pragmatic test for the correctness of an interpretation is really not fundamental to his hermeneutical position and therefore should not be criticized as if it were. But as it stands, it does allow a passage to be interpreted in as many different ways as there are emotional reactions. The sluice gates are opened to the flood of subjectivity. There is no objective and historical test possible. If an interpretation "blesses the soul" or produces a convert, then it is true whether it has anything to do with the meaning of the passage or not. This principle can lead to flagrant violations of the obvious meaning of

the text. While a sovereign God may overrule preaching based on exegesis of this sort, allowing for lives to be changed for the better, this certainly does not justify its use.

Spurgeon's understanding of the nature and interpretation of the Bible stood in open conflict with the critical views of biblical scholarship. As a contrast to Spurgeon we turn now to consider the tradition of Protestant Liberalism which largely accepted the presuppositions of these critical views in its approach to the Bible.

Chapter Seventeen
The Bible in Protestant Liberalism
Harry Emerson Fosdick

I. The Historical Roots of Fosdick's Thought

The perennial problem of biblical interpretation is how to make the Bible written in one situation and era speak with meaning and relevancy to another situation and era. The question has been: How is it possible to understand the Bible in such a way so that its universal message can be appreciated in a context which faces problems and employs thought forms far different from those of the biblical authors? Interpreters within the church, convinced that the Scriptures in some way are, contain or point to God's revelation, have been especially preoccupied with how to give the Bible its rightful place.

In our study we have noted that the solutions to this problem have varied from age to age and tend to reflect the preunderstanding of the interpreter seeking the solution. It has been our particular task, in the representative hermeneutical positions which we have considered, to determine the precise role of the author's preunderstanding in his interpretation of the biblical documents. We have observed that preunderstanding has both a positive and negative role to play. Positively, the interpreter's preunderstanding has supplied the attitudes and categories necessary for the

understanding of the biblical message, and without which no adequate interpretation would be possible. Negatively, we have observed that the interpreter's preunderstanding has dated his effort, often limiting its application to his own generation. The two questions which we have asked in an effort to ascertain the lasting value of an interpretive approach are: (1) Has there been a recognition of the necessity for the preunderstanding of faith? and (2) Has due consideration been given to history both as the milieu of God's self-disclosure and as a method to filter out the negative influences of preunderstanding? We have argued that it is faith which is able to perceive the true meaning of the revelation to which the Scriptures point and that it is the historical method which is able to "get at" that revelation and prevent its distortion as it is translated into the idiom of a particular age by a hermeneutical method.

One of the earliest approaches to the interpretation of the Bible was the allegorical, developed in its most systematic form by Origen. Desirous of reconciling the Christian revelation with the prevailing neo-Platonic philosophy of his day, Origen resorted to allegorizing the Scripture. Although Origen's method accomplished the goal of making the Bible more acceptable to his contemporaries, it was inadequate because it dehistoricized the redemptive events. In spite of this weakness, the allegorical method remained influential in the church for over a thousand years and did not receive a challenge which brought it to its knees until the Reformation.

It was Martin Luther who asserted that the Bible must be understood and interpreted historically if it is to be normative for the church. His christological hermeneutic, while tending to undermine the primacy of historical interpretation with its typological understanding of the Old Testament, was nevertheless balanced in giving to Scripture its rightful place of authority without denying the interpreter the right to critically examine the text.

Spinoza moved biblical interpretation down the road toward the modern understanding of Scripture with his insistence on the right of reason to question the Bible and all of its traditional interpretations. He argued that the Bible must be viewed as a product of history, not as a supernatural authority. Spinoza was correct in stressing the necessity of understanding the Bible historically, but he failed in not giving any place either to revelation as event or to faith in perceiving it by overestimating the all-sufficiency of reason. Both Wesley's and Spurgeon's views of the Bible were escapes from facing the implications of Spinoza's challenge. Wesley, by assigning central importance to religious experience in the interpretation of the Bible, did not fully appreciate the historical dimension of sound biblical exegesis. Spurgeon, by elevating the Bible to the place of the sacred, moved it completely out of reach of all historical investigation. But neither Wesley's Pietism nor Spurgeon's Protestant Orthodoxy could prevent the seeds planted by Spinoza from

bursting through the parched soil of the traditional views. In fact by the end of the eighteenth century the rational study of the Bible was developed to such an extent that handbooks of biblical interpretation setting forth the new method with its emphasis on a purely historical understanding of Scripture were being widely circulated.[1] People such as Lessing, Herder and Eichhorn wrote historical analyses of the Bible employing the new method. Giving impetus to these initial efforts of historical criticism was the custom in the German universities of studying the Bible away from the control of the church. In the German universities there was a new and romantic sense of freedom in historical scholarship. It was felt that impartial objective research could solve the riddles of history.

In the early part of the nineteenth century the critical historical method came to be regarded as the only legitimate kind of exegesis. Theologians such as Schleiermacher and Ritschl, proficient in biblical criticism as well as theology, saw the historical method as the means of constructing a belief system and reorganizing the material found in the Bible into new theological patterns. For many, the historical critical analysis of the Bible became almost identical with exegesis.

Underlying these efforts at theological reconstruction with their reliance on the critical study of the Bible were

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[1] Grant, op. cit., p. 123.

certain implicit philosophical presuppositions. For example, many of these theologians understood the universe to be governed by inflexible laws of nature, and therefore rejected, as had their rationalistic forebears, the possibility of miracles. Moreover toward the middle of the nineteenth century, at the height of Hegelian influence, Hegel's distinction between eternal ideas and temporary forms was employed. Believing that all the world was the self-manifestation of the divine mind, no distinctions were drawn between biblical writings and other writings. Such well-known theologians as F. C. Baur and David Strauss in the German world and Coleridge in England shared this basic approach.

By the end of the nineteenth century there was a general agreement on the method and results of the historical critical approach to the Bible.[2] The consensus was due in large measure to the work of two men, one an Old Testament scholar and the other a church historian interested in the essential message of the New Testament. In the Old Testament it was the work of Julius Wellhausen whose rigorous scholarship had convinced the majority of biblical scholars that the books of the Old Testament could be chronologically arranged, and that its ideas showed the gradual evolution from primitive to advanced, as in all other religions. It was Adolph von Harnack's analysis of the New Testament which carried the same persuasive force as Wellhausen in the Old Testament. Harnack asserted that the religion of Jesus had

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[2] Ibid., p. 130.

been distorted by Greek ideas but that, by careful historical study, one can discover in the Gospels his essential teaching regarding the Kingdom of Heaven, the Fatherhood of God and the ultimate value of the human soul and the need for the higher righteousness and love.

The American Protestant Liberalism in which Harry Emerson Fosdick has played such an active role accepted, with only a few changes as biblical scholarship progressed, this late nineteenth century consensus on the nature of the Bible. The motive behind their acceptance was supplied by the need to make it possible for an intelligent man to be a Christian. They believed that it was not a question of a new or an old theology, but of new or no theology. The old formulations based on an infallibly inspired Bible could not be accepted in light of the new discoveries in biblical studies.

In this liberal reconstruction of the Christian faith there were two essential elements, a new theological method and a fairly typical body of thought.[3] One feature of the new method was its attempt to frame Christian theology in such a way as to make it acceptable to the modern world. Man's conditions and his thought patterns, the liberal theologians contended, had altered radically since the creeds were formulated. Modern man is simply unable to appreciate the archaic sounding creeds. Christianity must be rethought and re-expressed in terms which are meaningful to the modern

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[3] William Hordern, A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology, New York, pp. 83-101.

mind. The antiquated categories of a prescientific era can be dropped without destroying the essence of Christianity. The outward husk can be discarded without damaging the kernel.

A second feature of the liberal theological method was its refusal to accept any doctrinal position on the basis of authority alone. All beliefs must stand up under the scrutiny of reason and experience. The mind of man, the liberals believed, has the capacity of thinking God's thoughts after Him; indeed man's intuitions and reason are the best manifestation of the nature of God. The best in man is the revelation of God. The open-minded man can discover truth all around him, and all truth is God's truth regardless of its source. No issues are settled. New discoveries may change convictions which have come to be regarded as essential to the Christian belief system. With this outlook, the liberals welcomed the higher criticism of the Bible and maintained that no religion is genuine if it is afraid of truth and attempts to protect itself from critical examination.

As one would expect with this theological method, there was a great variety of ideas within Protestant Liberalism. Yet because of common concerns and a shared heritage and culture, there were underlying assumptions held by most representatives of the movement. Standing behind the mainstream of liberal theology was the philosophy of Absolute Idealism, given its most elaborate form by Hegel and Lotze,

but reinterpreted on the American scene by Josiah Royce. Idealism began with the premise that if man is to have any confidence in his knowledge, he must assume a rational structure to reality apart from his mind. Man's reason and logical presuppositions are able to comprehend the world only if the world acts in accordance with them. Our minds are trustworthy only if the world is ultimately based on reason. Protestant Liberalism baptized this premise and argued that all reality may be interpreted as the manifestation of a divine mind. The process of christianizing idealism was made easier by the fact that both Hegel and Royce employed Christian terminology in their systems. But to these men Christian doctrines were inadequate symbols of rational truths known to man's reason. The central teaching of the Bible, that God has made Himself known in particular events of history, was considered by the idealists as primitive and pre-philosophical.

The liberals did not wholeheartedly accept all the teaching of idealistic philosophy, but they did make the notion of the immanence of God the foundation stone of their system. God, according to liberal thought, was dwelling in the world and working through nature. God accomplishes His will by progressive change and natural law. Therefore the sensitive person can find God in the whole of life. This emphasis led to the denial that God was the cause of some occurrences in the world and that natural forces were the cause of others. God is working through all that happens.

It followed that if God were at work in the total world process no special acts of revelation were necessary, nor did any one religious system have the corner on all truth. Other religions besides Christianity are also valid expressions of divine truth. In fact, even those who do not recognize God may in their allegiance and service to higher goals be a part of God's self-manifestation.

Assimilated into this idealistic structure was the evolutionary notion of the inevitability of progress. This optimism stemmed from the belief that the evolutionary hypothesis could be employed as a category to explain the social as well as the biological development of mankind. The world, they argued, is inherently rational and reason is slowly overcoming the irrational. Society is progressively being improved. The ultimate victory of goodness is assured.

The Bible in this framework held no theoretical claim to preferential treatment, (though in practice, especially with Fosdick, it was given preferential treatment). It was another book among the books of men to be studied scientifically. With the methods of higher criticism the liberals believed that it could be shown that the ideas in the Bible have gone through an evolutionary process. Revelation is progressive and the Bible is a record of man's response to revelation. At first, man's ideas concerning God were immature, but gradually as God disclosed more of Himself, these ideas became more mature, reaching their culmination in Jesus of Nazareth.

The exact place of Jesus in liberal thought varies from thinker to thinker. To some he is divine and the primary revelation of God and for others he is a great religious and ethical teacher. ~~Most~~ nearly all of the liberals were interested in the search for the historical Jesus, believing that if scholarship could uncover the true Jesus of history, their ideas about him would be confirmed. In general, it was felt that Harnack's summary of the character and teaching of Jesus was accurate. Jesus was one with God in the sense that he perfectly fulfilled the demands of God in his life. All men have the same potential, and Jesus is unique only in that he perfectly lived out the will of God in his life. Man is not bound by his sin, but can, by education and following the example of Jesus, achieve his true humanity.

Protestant Liberalism was inclined to be more interested in ethics than theology. The proof of authentic religion was not so much its system of doctrines as its good deeds. The pragmatic test of all religion is whether it is instrumental in creating a better world in which to live. Although Protestant Liberalism and the Social Gospel movement were not identical, the two were difficult to distinguish in many of their concerns. The Kingdom of God was identified with an ideal society on earth and the chief problems to be solved before the Kingdom could be ushered in were world peace and relations between races and social classes.

The main branch of liberalism, often called "Evangelical Liberalism", was characteristically dedicated to reason,

openmindedness and making the Christian faith acceptable to the modern mood, yet it was firmly rooted in the Bible and the Christian tradition. The chief representatives of evangelical liberalism were convinced of the reality of God and saw in Jesus the best expression of revelation. While unable to endorse many of the tenets of the classical creeds, they were at one with the traditional faith in asserting Christ's Lordship over all of life. The Bible was not an infallible book, but the sensitive listener could hear the Spirit of God speaking through its pages. Christianity, they affirmed, must be relevant to modern times, but its uniqueness should not be sacrificed in an effort to placate every modern whim. It was this wing of liberalism to which Harry Emerson Fosdick gave his leadership and service.

The events of Fosdick's life can be stated briefly. He was born in Buffalo, New York on May 24, 1878 to a middle class family. His parents, both Christians, soon exposed their son to the tenets of the Baptist faith. Later during his college years at Colgate, Fosdick first began to question the adequacy of the traditional beliefs on which he had been raised to express his faith. He remarks: "In my youth the time came when the formal creeds to me were dust and ashes. I did not believe them."[4] Still a convinced Christian, Fosdick proceeded from Colgate to Union Theological Seminary in New York in order to prepare himself for the ministry. At Union he was exposed to the best tradition of liberal

Christian scholarship and soon found new categories in which to express his faith. He was ordained to the Baptist ministry in 1903 and completed his Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1904. He later did a Master's degree at Columbia University.

In the Autumn of 1904 he assumed the responsibility of pastoring the First Baptist Church of Montclair, New Jersey, a position which he held until 1915. In addition to his responsibilities as pastor, he became in 1908 an instructor in homiletics at his former seminary. In 1915 he returned to New York City to become minister of the large First Presbyterian Church and Professor of Practical Theology at Union. The more conservative Presbyterians not only thought it strange to call an ordained Baptist to one of their more influential churches, but also found his liberal beliefs close to heresy. Ecclesiastical pressures made it nearly impossible for him to remain and he moved back to the Baptist ranks, taking over the pastorate at Park Avenue Baptist Church. Careful not to create another furor within the church, he accepted the position at Park Avenue only on the condition that it would be a creedless church and that all who desired to join would be accepted into membership regardless of their doctrinal position. Later this same congregation built the present Riverside Church whose pulpit Fosdick made famous with his dynamic preaching. He was soon recognized as one of the leading spokesmen of Protestant Liberalism. No fewer than twenty universities including Harvard, Yale and Princeton

recognized his contribution by awarding him honorary doctorates. His radio broadcasts were heard across the nation and his many books were widely circulated.

One of Fosdick's more influential sermons, preached in 1935, reflects his commitment to the protestant liberal theological method with its openness to change. In this sermon, entitled "The Church Must Go Beyond Modernism", he courageously attacked the weaknesses of the liberal position. He argued that liberal theology was preoccupied with intellectualism rather than life, dangerously sentimental, had watered down its concept of God and lost its ethical ground.[5] He did not want to deny the gains made by liberal theology over antiquarian orthodoxy, but was concerned to shift the liberal camp into a more realistic and hard-headed position, enabling it to challenge culture as well as accept its benefits.

The foundation of the preunderstanding with which Fosdick approaches the Bible, as it has been with most of the other thinkers we have examined, is faith. He believes that God is and that He has made Himself known in Jesus Christ. Yet faith is not without its cultural form, and the form which Fosdick's faith assumes is essentially that of the Protestant Liberal tradition.

Ideologically, Fosdick is convinced that new categories more in accord with the modern world must be found and utilized

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[5] Fosdick, Successful Christian Living, London, 1937, pp. 174 ff.

in the communication of the Christian message. Modern man will find very little in the ancient creeds which will speak to his situation. That which has abiding value, "the deep and vital experiences of the Christian soul with itself, with its fellows, with its God"...must be "carried over into this new world and understood in the light of the new knowledge."[6] Accordingly he accepts the predominant philosophical frame-work of his day. Evolutionary Idealism, Fosdick believed, provides modern man with categories in which to understand his faith without imposing authoritarian strictures. It allows the modern Christian to get away from conceptions of God which "have been shaped by picture-thinking set in the frame-work of the old world-view."[7] It helps him to assimilate modern science and evolutionary teaching, which point to the progressive development of rationality, into his religion,[8] and religion, "as Professor Royce of Harvard kept insisting, is at heart loyalty--loyalty to the highest we know."[9] In keeping with this philosophical framework is Fosdick's assumption that man at his best is the revelation of God. It is the human personality which supplies the key to the divine. God is immanent in the highest expressions of man's rationality and the most genuine aspects of his experience. Fosdick sums up his view when he says: "In man at his best, then, Reality

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6 Ibid., p. 175.

7 Fosdick, Adventurous Religion, London, 1926, p. 62.

8 Fosdick, The Secret of Victorious Living, London, 1934, p. 16.

9 Adventurous Religion, p. 144.

receives its clearest revelation--that is the faith of all high religion."[10] One of the distinctive marks of Christianity is that "it teaches men to hold a very lofty opinion of themselves. They are children of God, made in his image, destined for his character."[11] This comprehensive ideological construct, not always a consistent or a conscious feature of Fosdick's interpretation of Scripture, nevertheless functions as a major influence on it.

The attitudinal center of Fosdick's preunderstanding is his rejection of authority as the basis for framing a doctrinal position, and his openness to new truth at any level and from any source.[12] Neither the Bible nor the classical Christian tradition and its creeds can dictate a closed and final theological system. The church must remain open-minded and be willing to be taught new truth. In fact the one "heresy in Christianity is...to believe that we have reached finality and can settle down with a completed system."[13] These two attitudes, functioning dependently, consciously and consistently also constitute a major influence on his interpretation of the Bible.

The clue to the methodological assumptions which Fosdick brings to biblical interpretation can be found in his insistence that in the personality of Jesus one finds the embodiment of liberal ideals. It is possible "to get back behind the

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10 Ibid., p. 72.
11 Fosdick, Twelve Tests of Character, London, 1923, p. 4.
12 Fosdick, As I See Religion, New York, 1932, passim.
13 Adventurous Religion, p. 5.

thoughts of the centuries about Him, and to see the man Christ Jesus Himself as He lives in the pages of the gospels.... The broad outlines of His personality are clear and cannot be obscured by details of interpretation."[14] When such an effort is made, it becomes clear that Jesus, "whose divinity differs from ours in degree but not in kind",[15] supplies Fosdick with the motive and insights for his liberal reconstruction of the faith. Methodologically, then, Fosdick is committed to a critical historical approach to Scripture as the means of uncovering the authentic personality of Jesus.

We shall now examine how Fosdick's protestant liberal preunderstanding expresses itself in the particular presuppositions of his hermeneutical system.

II. Fosdick's Understanding of the Bible

Working with this preunderstanding, Fosdick frames what he calls a "new" approach to the Bible. It is necessary, he believes, because most ministers find the use of the Bible a difficult enigma. They either avoid whole sections of Scripture or use it as a place to find texts on which to hang their own thoughts. "An intelligent understanding of the Bible" must be developed which does justice to the findings of modern critical study without sacrificing the abiding

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14 Fosdick, The Manhood of the Master, London, 1920, p. 3.

15 Fosdick, The Hope of the World, London, 1934, p. 127.

value of Scriptural truth.[16]

The initial step in finding a hermeneutic which will accomplish this goal is to understand what sort of a book the Bible really is. The only way to find this out is to study it with the best critical methods available, i.e. higher criticism. Higher criticism is not an enemy, but a friend which uncovers when and why the books were written, who wrote them and to whom. This critical process, armed with the tools of modern literary, historical and archaeological research, has "gotten a result, at least in its outlines, well assured."[17]

The result obtained from historical study of the Scriptures is the possibility of "arranging the manuscripts of the Bible in approximately chronological order and then tracing through them the unfolding growth of the faith and hopes which come to their flower in the Gospel of Christ."[18] With the dating of the books it is possible to see the evolutionary development of the great ideas of Scripture "from their simple and elementary forms, when they first appear in the earliest writings, until they come to their full maturity in the latest."[19] Ages prior to the modern one had neither the scholarly instruments nor the idea of development and were therefore prevented from arriving at a correct interpretation. Inevitably the older interpreters tended to read the meanings

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16 Fosdick, The Modern Use of the Bible, London, 1925, pp. 11-13.

17 Ibid., p. 16.

18 Fosdick, Christianity and Progress, New York, 1922, p. 144.

19 The Modern Use of the Bible, p. 17.

of the New Testament back into the Old, finding by the use of type, symbol or allegory nearly all of the New Testament message. The Bible was seen not as the record of developing ideas but as a source book for speculative truth. But we are now able to correct these mistakes because we know "that every idea in the Bible started from primitive and childlike origins and...grew in scope and height toward the culmination in Christ's gospel."[20] The only way to really know the Bible is to trace through the whole of Scripture the development of its structural ideas.

Thus the Bible which is often unappreciated or ignored because it appears ancient and difficult to read can be understood and followed in the modern world. The historical study of the Bible, involving a shift of mental presuppositions and categories can uncover the original, native meaning of any section in terms of the time when it was written. By the use of various disciplines (the study of the relevant languages, the discovery and translation of ancient literatures, textual criticism, history, archaeology and comparative religion), it is possible to discover in terms of its historic significance just what any passage meant to the people who first wrote it and first read it.[21]

In a later book,[22] Fosdick applies this concept to six

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20 Ibid., p. 21.

21 Ibid., pp. 43 ff.

22 A Guide to Understanding the Bible, London, 1938.

major strands of biblical thought: the ideas of God, man, right and wrong, suffering, fellowship with God and immortality. As an illustration of his method, let us look at his treatment of the idea of God. Fosdick asserts that Moses understood God as "the mountain God" much like Zeus or Olympus and many another primitive deity was understood.[23] Yahweh, the mountain god of Sinai, had a number of characteristics. He was a storm god, associated with violent exhibitions of nature's power. He was the god of war, battling for his people and leading them to victory. He was also a tribal god, establishing a covenant with his people. In general he was described in anthropomorphic terms. When the wandering people finally settled in Israel, Yahweh became a territorial and agricultural deity. Gradually, his domain was enlarged to include the sky, and he then could display his power outside of his land. In time, as Yahweh came to be linked with the royal line and was identified with the traumas of Israel's social and political situation, there emerged a pure monotheism. By the time of the New Testament, Greek ideas had further refined the concept of God. Thus the notion of Yahweh evolved from the primitive myth of "a mountain god in the desert until he became known as the 'God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'."[24]

According to Fosdick, certain results follow from this

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23 Ibid., pp. 2 ff.
24 Christianity and Progress, p. 45.

kind of historical study of the Bible. For one thing, the Bible is restored to its rightful place. It can once again be viewed as a "whole Book"[25] which records man's gradual awareness of God's progressive self-revelation. The true and lasting contribution of Scriptural ideas can be perceived in their unified development. Rightly understood, "the abiding usefulness of the Book lies in its appeal to the unchanging spiritual needs and experiences of man."[26] Correctly interpreted, "the Bible is the supreme Book of spiritual life. There we touch a valid revelation of the character and will of God. It is a fountain that never runs dry, and the better it is known the better for personal character and social progress."[27] Seen as the record of man's experience of God, the Bible can speak relevantly to modern man. It is "a priceless treasury of spiritual truth, and from it have come the basic ideas and ideals on which the best of our democratic culture is founded."[28]

A second result of the historical examination of the Bible is that it saves us from the need of apologizing for immature stages in the development of the biblical revelation. The Bible no longer has to be conceived of as infallibly inspired and universally authoritative. But this does not mean that God had no part in its writing. Fosdick affirms that "the

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25 The Modern Use of the Bible, p. 36.
26 Adventurous Religion, p. 122.
27 Ibid., p. 98.
28 Fosdick, Dear Mr. Brown, London, 1962, p. 55.

Spirit of God was behind the process and in it.... The under-side of the process is man's discovery; the upper side is God's revelation."[29] Yet the part God plays does not nullify the influence of the historical situation of the biblical authors on their writing. For whatever inspiration may mean, it certainly does not mean that the biblical authors in their writing were lifted out of their own time and "provided with mental thought-forms, scientific explanations and world-views of a generation thousands of years unborn."[30] The Bible is inspired only in the sense that it is "rich in spiritual insight, vision, enlightenment, illumination."[31] There is certainly no place in religion for the attempt to reconcile the Bible with science. Such efforts always miss the point because they do not accept the fact that the Bible says nothing about science. It knows nothing about science. Therefore to place it in opposition to evolution for example is "ludicrously false."[32]

It follows thirdly that one is saved from the old and impossible task of harmonizing the Bible with itself, i.e. making it speak with a unanimous voice. The conflicts and contradictions need not be forced into some sort of strained and artificial unity. "The idea", writes Fosdick, "that the

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29 The Modern Use of the Bible, p. 38.
30 Adventurous Religion, p. 95.
31 Dear Mr. Brown, p. 55.
32 Adventurous Religion, p. 96.

Bible is a unanimous book upon one level is quite incredible to anyone who knows the Bible at all."[33] As the story of man's maturing religious conceptions, the Bible makes sense, but viewed as a systematic text-book on divine truth, the Bible is completely misunderstood.

But even with this understanding of the Bible, the hermeneutical question still remains. How should the Bible be interpreted to have a message for modern man? In what way is this book, written by a variety of authors in many different ancient cultures, able to say anything to men in a scientific age? The nerve of Fosdick's answer to this question lies in his distinction between man's abiding experiences and their temporary expressions or categories.[34] The universal truths of the Bible are cased in outmoded language and thought-forms. The interpreter must uncover the "abiding experience" which lies buried beneath a prescientific world view. His task is to decode "the abiding meanings of Scripture from outgrown phraseology."[35]

Fosdick gives several examples which illustrate his hermeneutical method. The abiding truth that the personality will survive death wears the ancient garment of the resurrection of the flesh.[36] The notion of the physical return of Jesus

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33 What is Vital in Religion, London, 1956, p. 64.
34 The Modern Use of the Bible, p. 60, pp. 101 ff.
35 Ibid., p. 123.
36 Ibid., p. 101.

points to the final victory of righteousness upon the earth in the coming of the Kingdom of God.[37] The references to angels is equivalent to affirming the nearness of God.[38] The importance of the miracle stories lies in their reminder to us that we need God's power in our lives.[39]

There are, Fosdick recognizes, perils in this "new" approach to biblical interpretation. One peril is that the modern critical and analytical mind will often miss true spiritual values which are more easily discerned by naive and childlike faith. The Bible must be seen as "a book of vital personal religion"[40] or its message will go unnoticed. A second danger is that the new categories which are constructed to house the abiding experiences will lack clarity. In an effort to be emancipated from the bondage of ancient categories, interpreters may neglect the formulation of new ones, and since the emphasis is upon experience, this neglect may lead to sentimental platitudes.[41] A final peril is the possibility of being disloyal to the ethics of Jesus. This "moral" peril consists of the difficult task of reproducing the spirit and quality of Scriptural living.[42]

Conscious of these perils, Fosdick turns to the primary task of applying his hermeneutical theory to the interpretation of Jesus. It is the personality of Jesus which is at the heart

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37 Ibid., p. 106.
38 Ibid., p. 129.
39 Ibid., pp. 132-165.
40 Ibid., p. 177.
41 Ibid., p. 180.
42 Ibid., p. 188.

of the biblical message and which supplies direction to all high religion. The "abiding experiences of Christianity center in the Master."[43] The two primary categories employed by the early church to describe the personality of Jesus were Messiah and Logos. Jesus did not create these categories for himself, but they were already existing when he appeared. They were applied to him because they were the loftiest ones which the early Christians possessed and the only way they could understand "this supreme personality."[44] Yet they are inadequate and should not be taken literally. The first requisite of the modern interpreter of Jesus "is insight to look through not only the church's elaborate theologies about him, but even the New Testament's first phrasing of him, and to become acquainted with, enamoured of, the personality himself, around whom so many frameworks of interpretation have arisen, and yet who himself is greater than them all."[45] The interpreter must try as thoroughly as he can to go "back to the historical Jesus."[46]

What the interpreter discovers in this effort is a person who has bequeathed to mankind a rich heritage of religious ideas.[47] Jesus has given the world its most significant idea of God. He has immeasurably heightened man's estimate of his own worth and possibilities. He has made us aware of

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43 Ibid., p. 208.
44 Ibid., p. 211.
45 Ibid., p. 215.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., pp. 217-227.

the possibility of moral reclamation and renewal. He has given the world its loftiest ethical ideals. The historic Jesus has passed on to men the supreme example of vicarious sacrifice. And finally he has supplied an object of loyalty for the noblest devotions of the generations since he came.

Does such a notable contribution to mankind imply that Jesus is divine? Yes, he was divine, but his divinity was not primarily a doctrine but an experience, and one that all men have the possibility of sharing. In order to understand Jesus, one must get away from the creeds with their outworn categories and realize that for Jesus as with us "all the best in us is God in us."[48] The underlying presupposition of Fosdick's position is the conviction, not that there is a vast difference between God and man, but that God and man belong together. When we ascribe divinity to Jesus, we are saying that all men are potentially divine. The doctrine of the incarnation is the hope of God's indwelling in every one of us. The uniqueness of Jesus is in degree, not kind, and thus he is not only our Lord, but our brother and supreme example.

Because Jesus was divine, the revelation of the living God who seeks to be incarnate in every one of us, the Bible which speaks of Jesus is revelatory. It is the personality of Jesus which makes the "whole Book vibrate with expectancy."[49] Indeed the message of the book is summed up in Christ. It

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48 Ibid., p. 261.

49 Ibid., p. 265.

should not therefore be interpreted literally or legalistically, but in terms of the spirit and character of Jesus. He has revealed the quality and principles of true living.

Toward the end of his examination of the modern use of the Bible Fosdick adds an autobiographical note which serves as a summary of his position. He writes that from the

> naive acceptance of the Bible as of equal credibility in all its parts because mechanically inerrant, I passed years ago to the shocking conviction that such traditional bibliolatry is false in fact and perilous in result. I saw with growing clearness that the Bible must be allowed to say in terms of the generations when its books were written what its word in their historic sense actually meant, and I saw that often the historic sense was not the modern sense at all, and never could be.[50]

So, in order to prevent modern man from losing the Bible, its abiding message must be separated from its ancient categories, and the key to the separating process is the life and personality of Jesus.

III. A Concluding Evaluation

There is "abiding" value in the central motivation behind Fosdick's hermeneutical effort. He has taken seriously the advances of critical scholarship and rightly asserts that the Bible cannot be understood apart from historical study. And in a valiant effort, he has attempted to preserve its message for the church with his distinction between abiding experiences and changing categories. The Bible should be studied historically and its message needs to be made under-

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50 Ibid., p. 267.

standable to modern men. Few would quarrel with these objectives.

Yet there is at least one potential weakness in his approach to the Bible. It lies not so much in his objectives as in their application. This potential weakness is his uncritical acceptance of and whole-hearted alliance with idealistic philosophy. Let us examine what problems this raises for Fosdick's hermeneutical system.

In the first place, there is the fact that his idealism, translated into Christian terminology, is now out of vogue and has little contemporary appeal. When linked with an evolutionary optimism, it appears sentimental and unrealistic. But this is not the primary difficulty with Fosdick's interpretive method. It is more an occupational hazard of all biblical interpreters who have the responsibility of translating the biblical message into contemporary thought. Indeed, as we have been attempting to show, no biblical interpreter can ever be entirely free from the categories of the predominant philosophical moods of his day.

But the greater difficulty of his system lies in failing to be self-conscious and critical about the conceptual structure which he adopts. The interpreter must ask whether the framework he employs is the best vehicle in which to carry the biblical message. The crucial question is: Does it maximize the Bible's relevance to believers without distorting the biblical message at any critical point? That Fosdick's interpretation of Scripture was relevant to his hearers we

have no doubt, but that he may have distorted the Bible's essential message is another question.

The problem becomes especially evident when we observe, as a case in point, how the historical method is linked with evolutionary idealism. Taking his cue from Wellhausen, Fosdick assumed that by dating the writings of the Bible it would be possible to reconstruct the history of how its ideas developed from primitive beginnings in polytheism up through stages of belief in one ethical God. Yet modern historical scholarship does not support such an assumption. That Moses conceived of God as a localized mountain deity is simply not the case. Wellhausen, and Fosdick following in his tracks, rewrote history to fit Hegelian philosophy with its concept of evolutionary development. The problem is equally acute in Fosdick's interpretation of the New Testament in Harnackian categories. The view that Jesus is our brother and example, preaching the Kingdom of love and inspiring men with his dynamic personality, says more about Fosdick's liberal understanding than about Jesus. In short, Fosdick has allowed his preunderstanding to unduly bias his historical judgments. One modern scholar has called Fosdick's _A Guide to Understanding the Bible_ in which he develops this theme "an obituary to last century's scholarship."[51] There is always the danger of an over-accommodation of the gospel in its deepest kernel to the dominant spirit and thinking of the time in a zealous effort to make its meaning and message relevant. That Fosdick may have done this in his interpretation of Scripture is a distinct possibility.

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51 Quoted by Hordern, _A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology_, p. 105.

SECTION IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Chapter Eighteen

Interpreting the Faith

I. Summary of the Theme

Our study of preunderstanding in historical and biblical interpretation would not be complete without some attempt to restate the main thread of our theme, to summarize the results of its application to representative interpretive approaches and to draw some conclusions for the general task of interpretation. We turn first to the theme itself.

Our objective was to demonstrate the role of preunderstanding in the interpretation of the Christian faith. We began with the observation that preunderstanding is an ever present factor in all perception, apprehension and interpretation of reality. We read the signs which reality sends our way through our own particular set of assumptions and attitudes, assumptions and attitudes which we hold because of our total life situation.

We established four categories of type in which to analyze preunderstanding: the informational, the ideological, the attitudinal and the methodological. We then suggested as a working hypothesis several ways which a preunderstanding may function in an interpretation of reality. It may function

as a major or minor, or positive or negative influence. It may be comprehensive or limited in scope, or independent of or dependent upon other assumptions and attitudes. It may operate consistently or inconsistently, rationally or irrationally, consciously or unconsciously or closed-mindedly or openendedly. These categories of type and function gave us the means of analyzing the specific preunderstanding of the interpreters we considered in Sections II and III.

As part of our argument in Section I, we stressed that preunderstanding has both a positive and negative role to play. The negative role we found to be obvious enough. When the interpreter allows his preunderstanding to distort his apprehension of reality, then his preunderstanding clearly has a negative influence. The positive role of preunderstanding is less frequently recognized. It consists of the simple fact that we can apprehend nothing without some prior structure. We would stare in uncomprehension if we did not have some categories in which to "make sense" out of that which we observe. We argued further along the same line that different aspects of reality suggest, even demand, an appropriately corresponding preunderstanding to be present in the observer for them to be correctly grasped and interpreted. Assuming that the Christian revelation is no exception to this general rule, we set about finding the appropriate preunderstanding necessary to its comprehension.

In our investigation we maintained an "internalist" position, i.e. that the Christian faith must be interpreted

partly in its own terms, and an "externalist" view like that of Bultmann who interprets Christianity in existentialist categories.[1] In keeping with the internalist position, we argued that the Christian revelation demands that faith be present if it is to be understood. It is faith which is the necessary preunderstanding for the interpretation of Christianity. We defined faith in its classical sense with its component parts of cognition (i.e. faith that God is and has made Himself known in Christ) and trust (i.e. faith in God). Faith, defined as both cognition and trust, we said contained the minimum necessary informational, ideological and attitudinal elements for an adequate interpretation of the Christian revelation. In support of our assertion that it is faith which is necessary in the interpretation of the Christian revelation, we reasoned, beyond the clear-cut biblical statements to that effect, that: (1) In most cases, it is only the man of faith who is open to the possibility that God is, and has revealed Himself in certain acts of history. (2) The man of faith stands in personal relationship to God. He "knows" God in Jesus Christ. Christian truth is not only factual but personal. God is known not just by way of history in His revelatory acts, but also as these acts are made contemporary in the life of the believer by the Holy Spirit. The Christian claims are confirmed by God in the believer's experience. (3) Finally, the man of faith has an attitude toward the facts

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[1] See James Barr, Old and New in Interpretation, pp. 171 ff. for a discussion of "internalist" and "externalist" positions.

surrounding the appearance of Christ which is sympathetic. The man of faith has sensitivity and insight which give him the capacity to appreciate and identify with the Christian message. He has affinity and rapport with the material to be interpreted.

But this internalist emphasis upon faith was balanced by the recognition that faith itself assumes a cultural form. Faith as a preunderstanding takes shape in a particular historical era. Faith is never free from the predominant thought forms of its time. Indeed, faith is only made meaningful when it is expressed in these thought forms. While faith has certain universal constants, these constants are inevitably and rightly conceptualized in terms of the external categories current in the cultural milieu. Hence faith as a preunderstanding has both an internal and external component.

This led us on to the second major strand of our theme, namely the relationship of preunderstanding to history and more specifically of faith to history. Believing that there is no such thing as "pure" faith, i.e. faith free from cultural conditioning, we argued that faith must be joined with the historical method in order to form an appropriate preunderstanding for interpreting the Christian revelation. The historical method must serve as a means of filtering out the biases which inevitably accompany and distort faith. We called these biases the "negative influence of preunderstanding" and suggested that it is only the rigorous application of

the historical method which prevents faith from postulating whatever it wishes.

An even more basic reason for the utilization of the historical method in the interpretive task is the Christian contention that God has made Himself known in history and uniquely so in Jesus Christ. From a study of contemporary theories of hermeneutics (Chapter 2) and revelation (Chapter 3) we learned that there is a growing consensus among theologians and biblical scholars that the interpretation of the Christian faith, because of its central affirmation of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, is intimately bound up with the study of history. We then turned our attention to the role of preunderstanding in historical study (Chapter 4). We concluded among other things that: (1) Because the historian does not have direct access to the series of events which he is examining and because he cannot escape the influence of his preunderstanding, his judgments have the character of probability, not absolute certainty. (2) Historical study need not necessarily be bound to a presupposition which excludes the possibility of postulating God as an active agent in history.

These conclusions cleared the way for a discussion of the implications of subjecting the Christian faith to a historical examination (Chapter 5). Here we argued that: (1) The sources regarding the Christian faith which are available to us (Scripture and tradition) must be subjected to a critical historical examination if we are to understand

them and the faith about which they speak. (2) The study of the biblical manuscripts and the Christian tradition (by the historical method) together with an openness to the possibility of God acting in history (faith) leads to the probability that God has revealed Himself in the Christ-event. (3) Faith and history, then, constitute the minimum requirements for an adequate hermeneutic.

II. The Application of the Theme

We turned in Sections II and III from the theme itself to its application in representative historical and biblical interpretations of the Christian faith. Our purpose in doing so was threefold: (1) to test the validity of our argument in light of the best representative interpretations of the faith which have appeared during the life of the church; (2) to analyze these representative interpretations by the main contentions of our theme; and (3) to discover, by this analysis, some guidelines for a constructive hermeneutical position.

We focused our attention in Section II on six representative historical interpretations of the Christian faith. These six views were concerned primarily with interpreting the broad sweep of Christianity in terms of its place in history and the meaning which it supplies to the rest of history. Our approach was to analyze the interpreter's preunderstanding in its formation, type and function, to discuss its role in his historical interpretation and then to evaluate his views in terms of our criteria of faith and historical study. Because of the survey nature of our treatment, we limited

our discussion of the interpreter's preunderstanding to those aspects of it which we judged to play an important role in his interpretation of the Christian faith. Several conclusions were reached from this study which might be summarized as follows.

Negatively, we noted that the Christian revelation tended to be distorted when either one of two essential elements to any adequate interpretation was missing. In the first instance, distortion took place when the preunderstanding of faith was either not present or completely overshadowed by another point of view. It was especially evident in Gibbon who forced Christianity to fit into the confines of his rationalistic presuppositions and into the historical context of the decline of the Roman Empire. It was also apparent in Hegel whose Absolute Idealism distorted Christian beliefs by calling them prephilosophical expressions of rational truth. Less obviously it existed in Harnack whose bourgeois liberalism created a Jesus in its own image.

Secondly, we observed the danger, though not always the presence, of distortion when there was either little understanding or neglect of the need to relate the Christian revelation to history. Augustine, because the ideas of history and historical study were as yet undeveloped, was unable to appreciate the historical nature of revelation and to critically examine the historical sources. Reacting off a positivist view of history, Brunner created a realm of super-history to

protect the redemptive events from historical skepticism, and thereby neglected to emphasize God's activity in the totality of history. Reinhold Niebuhr asserted that God is the prime-mover in all of history without negating the uniqueness of the redemptive events, but his undue pessimism and his use of the notions of myth and symbol in describing the redemptive events clouded his view with gloom and confusion.

Positively, we learned that it is faith guided by historical study which supplies the clue to the interpretation of the Christian revelation and all of history. It answers the question of how the action of God in universal history is related to His unique deeds in a special history and how these deeds in turn illuminate the meaning of God's action in the whole of history. While not pretending to put forward a full-fledged theology of history, we did make two minimal assertions. (1) The God of the biblical witness is an active agent in the totality of history. This means, on the negative side, the rejection of the position that God is active at some point of <u>Kairos</u> and not at others, or that the presence of God in salvation history implies an absence of God in universal history. (2) The God of the biblical witness encounters and deals with the whole of history and the cosmos proleptically and prototypically through a special history, the history of the people of Israel and the Christ, so as to illumine His purposes and presence in and for the whole. We rejected the view which claims that the presence of God in universal history

renders meaningless or useless the special action of God in the history of Israel and in Christ. We thus concluded that to bifurcate Heilsgeschichte and universal history as distinct theological alternatives was to misunderstand the biblical witness to the God who acts in the one for the many.[2] Such a bifurcation implies either the absence of faith or the neglect of history.

In Section III we moved to a consideration of six representative interpretations of the biblical material itself. In these six views we were concerned to determine the role of preunderstanding in the interpreter's conception and interpretation of the Bible. As we progressed we discovered tendencies similar to those present in the historical interpretations examined in Section II. When the preunderstanding of faith was overshadowed by other presuppositions (e.g. Spinoza and to a lesser degree Fosdick) the biblical material was forced to fit those presuppositions. When historical study was not given its proper place (Origen, Wesley, Spurgeon, and to some extent, Luther) there was a tendency to make the biblical material say whatever the interpreter's preunderstanding suggested.

On the positive side we found that faith balanced by historical study was the key to a biblical hermeneutic. This led us to suggest a minimum directive for biblical exegesis. Faith, as a theological and christological affirmation, says

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[2] See Thomas C. Oden, Contemporary Theology and Psychotherapy, Philadelphia, 1967, pp. 134 f.

that exegesis should avoid, in its attempt to communicate Christianity to the present age, an over accommodation of the biblical message to the current mood. The present age may inform, and rightly should inform, our exegesis, but an interpretation which gives primacy to the preunderstanding of faith argues that the present age must ultimately be brought before the forum of the Christian message. It affirms that Christ himself speaks; he comes to present himself to us in the pages of Scripture. Any other viewpoint which attempts to find in Scripture hints of eternal truths or ethical norms has imposed upon Scripture an alien point of view. Yet this "faith hermeneutic" is always checked by historical study to prevent the unbridled reign of subjectivity. The historical method attempts to prevent faith from asserting its own historically conditioned distortions.

Thus, in both historical and biblical interpretation, we find faith and history coming together in Jesus Christ. This of course does not mean that all who have faith and join it with historical study will arrive at the same conclusions in interpreting the Christian faith. Our conclusions will still be limited by the preunderstanding given to us by our age. We will still be making relative judgments which merely point to the absolute. On the other hand, these two guidelines serve as a perimeter within which a constructive hermeneutic can be framed for our time.

III. Mandates for Interpretation

We have restated our theme and summarized the results of its application to representative historical and biblical interpretations. At the risk of being a bit repetitive, it might now be helpful to suggest some mandates which the recognition of preunderstanding impose on the interpreter as he turns to the Christian revelation.

1. The interpreter must be cognizant of the fact that he cannot avoid possessing a preunderstanding. He will bring to the interpretive task certain assumptions and attitudes which will take various forms and function in a variety of ways. Some of these assumptions and attitudes will be consciously articulated and others will be almost totally unconscious.

2. This means that the interpreter should have a certain amount of humility about his own formulations, realizing that they will only be an approximation or partial vision of the reality which he is attempting to interpret. His interpretation will inevitably bear the stamp of the cultural and historical era of which he is a part. He will perform the task of interpretation in a context, not in a vacuum, and his work will reflect the modes of thought of this context.

3. The interpreter should nevertheless pursue his task, taking heart from the fact that even the biblical testimony to the Christ-event is cased in the thought forms of the culture of the first century. Indeed, to put the matter positively, the interpreter's responsibility is to formulate

the Christian faith in a manner which his generation can understand. This will involve translating the biblical message into a contemporary idiom and employing concepts and categories which are external to the biblical material.

4. In his effort to translate the Christian message into contemporary terms, the interpreter must be careful not to distort the essential message of the gospel. He should not so accommodate himself to the modern setting that he distorts the universal constant, the Christ-event, the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ. At what point the interpreter ceases communicating the Christian message, and begins to distort it, is not always easy to determine. And attempts to set up lists of essentials are not really satisfactory because these lists themselves are historically conditioned. Yet, provisionally, we might say that when the interpreter begins to deny the notion of a personal God who in love has made Himself known in Jesus Christ, then the interpreter has perhaps given up too much.

5. In an effort to prevent distortion, the interpreter should attempt to be conscious as far as possible of his pre-understanding. He should know something of the ideological structure of his thinking, the basic attitudes he holds and the methodology he plans to employ. This self-consciousness will allow him to check and control the negative influence and accentuate the positive influence of his preunderstanding.

6. Further, in the same vein, the interpreter should

attempt to frame a preunderstanding (hermeneutic) which will most adequately aid him in his interpretation. We suggested as minimum requirements for such a hermeneutic faith and historical study. Faith is that complex of assumptions and attitudes which puts the interpreter "in touch" with that which is to be interpreted. But faith, because it always assumes a cultural form, must be checked by history. It is the study of history which performs the vital twofold function of preventing the interpreter's historically conditioned preunderstanding from distorting the given, and of giving him access to the historical revelation in Christ. Faith gives historical study its direction and historical study protects faith against unchecked subjectivism.

With these mandates, we conclude our study of preunderstanding in historical and biblical interpretation.

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