

out nations seem to demand setting in their historical contexts. Slightly different is the movement for racial purity in Ezra and Nehemiah. In their proper context, they will not support Apartheid, for it was religious purity that was at stake, as both books state quite clearly.

The whole of Scripture must be taken into account. The principles and precepts can explain each other and counterbalancing themes can have their effect. Not only would the themes of Social Ethics reflect more accurately the Biblical teaching, but also Social Ethics as a whole would take its proper place in the scheme of Christian thought and not take too small or too important a part.

Finally, there is the application of our exegesis to the modern world. Unless the exegete knows today's society, its structure, morality and problems, his Social Ethics will have little practical use. Again, two way traffic is essential. The exegete needs to be aware of the problems of modern society, and Christians in life's thick forest need instruction on how to think through these problems biblically, that is, exegetically.

Exegesis is hard work. There are no valid short cuts. Unless, however, we are content to leave the field to those not committed to this outlook, the hard work must be done.

FORM CRITICISM AND THE GOSPELS

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Form criticism is basically a method of study of literature both Biblical and extra-Biblical, religious and secular, which attempts to isolate

and classify the alleged original 'forms' which came together to make up the autograph documents, so identifying the processes by which the latter eventually came into being. One of the earliest Biblical form critics was the German Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) who applied the method to the Old Testament. Its application to the New Testament was commenced by Martin Dibelius, K.L.Schmidt and Rudolf Bultmann, amongst others, at about the turn of the century. The name of Bultmann, professor of New Testament studies at Marburg from 1921 to 1951, towers above all others in the realm of form criticism. Accordingly, this paper will try to examine his thinking in some detail.

1. The Philosophical Background to New Testament Form Criticism

Form criticism really needs to be interpreted in the context of a continuum of secular philosophic thought extending from the late 18th century to recent years. There can be little doubt that the flow of philosophical speculation over a period of some one hundred and fifty years has seriously affected critical approaches to Scripture in general and to the Synoptics in particular.

Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804) taught that a metaphysical knowledge of God is quite impossible and denied the validity of the traditional proofs for the existence of God. For him faith at best is strictly rational, the moral consciousness being a divine imperative. He conceived religion to be basically a subjective experience deriving in no way from objective revelation.

The idea that reality exists independently of the mind was rejected completely by Georg Hegel (1770-1831). For him genuine experience presupposes the essential unity of the knower and that which is known. While such a unity is explicit in religious experience, it matures in the context of philosophical thinking. Basically pantheistic, Hegel

taught the way of dialecticism - the view that reality is wedded to, rather than appropriated by the self.

Hegel's contemporary, Freidrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), was repelled by the emergent scientific materialism of his day as well as by the earlier philosophic scepticism of Locke and Hume. As a counterbalance he sought to lay the foundations of theology in the emotions and moral imperatives which men possess. Christianity was visualised by him as subjective to the detriment of any objective element, psychology being far more significant than revelation.

The Dane Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55) reacted against Hegelian idealism and stressed the infinite gap between this world and the supra-temporal. Such a radical cleavage implied a heavily subjective interpretation of Christianity. Kierkegaard believed that the finite words of men can never express the mind of remote infinity. Albrecht Ritschl (1822-89) rejected metaphysics plus those Christian doctrines which could not, in his view, be verified by either history or experience. This led him to posit a radical distinction between the Christ of Christian orthodoxy and the actual Jesus of history.

The flow of thought from Kant to Ritschl laid continual stress upon the subjective aspect of religious experience, notwithstanding the wide divergences of approach between different writers. In more recent times this quasi-religious subjectivism has been accentuated in the existentialist school of thought. An approach to philosophy rather than a doctrinaire credo, existentialism in its secular form flatly denies the existence of God. There have been, nevertheless, existentialists who were nominal Protestants and Catholics, their common denominator

being a disenchantment with external authority and traditional values. Such thinking has exerted a profound influence upon the form-critical process.

2. Liberal Criticism of the Gospels

In the history of Gospel-criticism the key-word is discontinuity, by which is meant a posited disjunction between the teaching and acts of the historic Jesus and the developed theology and kerygma of the primitive Church. Philosophic subjectivism and alleged synoptic discontinuity are the true parents of the mid-20th Century form-critical approach to the Gospels.

Ferdinand Bauer (1762-1860) postulated a clash between primitive Jewish and Hellenistic Christianity. His whole approach was fundamentally anti-supernatural and even anti-theistic. David Strauss (1808-74) was a student of Bauer's at Tubingen and held that the actual life of Christ had become overlaid by the pious fantasies and folk-legend of the early Church. Towards the end of his life he declared that Christianity would finally be superseded by a secular humanitarianism.

Well to the fore theologically by the turn of the century, Adolf Harnack (1851-1930) retained unorthodox views of the miracles and the resurrection, believing that Christian faith is valid quite apart from the historicity of the resurrection.

Following hard upon Harnack came Wilhelm Wrede. Ostensibly repudiating the hard-going liberalism of Harnack he nevertheless upheld the thesis of discontinuity.

Finally, we turn to Albert Schweitzer whose *'Quest of the Historical Jesus'* retained a relatively high view of the historical accuracy of the synoptics, yet rejecting the concept of miracle. Furthermore, he held the remarkable notion that Jesus died with a view to an immediate introduction of the eschatological state but failed to achieve his purpose. Thus, *"The whole history of 'Christianity' down to*

the present day ... is based on the delay of the Parousia ... the abandonment of eschatology ... Again, there is a fundamental disjunction between Schweitzer's historical Jesus and the Christ of the early kerygma. So emerges his view that *"it is not Jesus as historically known, but Jesus as spiritually arisen within men, who is significant for our time and can help it. Not the historical Jesus, but the spirit which goes forth from Him ... is that which overcomes the world..." "Jesus as a concrete historical personality remains a stranger to our time ..."*

3. Karl Barth

By 1920 the well-established liberal approach to the Synoptics was seen to be highly vulnerable. As R.A. Finlayson remarked, *"the First World War... gave a shattering blow to the theological optimism that was based on the inevitability of human progress. There was also the fact that a new ideology (ie. Communism) had arisen ... and for this the vagaries of Liberalism were no match .."*

Karl Barth brought out his revolutionary exposition of Romans, in 1919. As against the old liberalism, Barth stressed the transcendence of God while at the same time denying the possibility of men knowing God as an objective entity in Himself. Barth divorced Christian faith from objective history and knowledge. For him the Word of God is God speaking personally rather than a book which may be read by all. Thus Scripture becomes a witness, even a divinely ordained witness, to the Word; yet it is not in itself the Word of God. While the theology of divine immanence neglected to emphasise the transcendence of God, Barthian dialectic stressed the latter to the neglect of the former. A consequence is that since revelation is allegedly supra-historical, Scripture becomes divine revelation only when God deigns to confront the Bible-reading individual. Of themselves the Scriptures convey no infallible,

objective knowledge of the wholly-other God.

Barth's protest against the older liberalism brings him full circle back to the subjectivism of traditional philosophy. Subjective experience alone is the arbiter of true religion with no essential submission to any historical revelation. This leads directly to the position where the historical accuracy of the Gospel records becomes arguably irrelevant. Thus the apparent revolt of Barthian dialectic theology can be interpreted as little more than a disguised recrudescence of an older, well-established unorthodoxy. This needs to be borne in mind because Bultmann, the virtual figure-head of form-criticism, emerged under the panoply of Barthian dialecticism.

4. Bultmann - the Revolt against Dialectical Theology

Wrede's thesis concerning the so-called 'Messianic secret' was a major factor in Bultmann's development of the idea that the Gospels are less historical accounts of the life of Jesus and more theologically orientated products of the early Christian communities. Bultmann held that upon close scrutiny the Gospels could be reduced to basic units, or forms, which had grown up in an early, oral stage of the Christian tradition, a sort of tunnel period between the life of Jesus and the eventual production of the Gospels as we now have them. Furthermore, he highlighted those logia of Jesus which, in his terminology, call for 'decision' and felt able to assert that *'The real significance of the 'Kingdom of God' for the message of Jesus lies in any case not in the dramatic events associated with its coming ... It does not interest Jesus at all as a condition, but rather as the transcendent event, which signifies for man the great either-or, which compels man to decision.'* By 'transcendent event' Bultmann means that which is both non-historical and supra-historical. Together with the miraculous he

flatly denies orthodox eschatology.

i) Bultmann and the Liberal Quest for the Historic Jesus.

A principle formative influence in the thinking of Rudolf Bultmann was his reaction against the historic Jesus posited by the older liberal school as represented, for example, by Schweitzer. Bultmann early believed that because investigation into the historicity of the Gospel records is so fraught with uncertainty it is better to pin one's personal faith neither upon the emasculated Jesus of liberal rationalism nor upon the more deeply coloured Jesus of orthodox Christianity. So he claims that *"To believe in the cross of Christ does not mean to concern ourselves with a mythical process wrought outside of us and our world, or with an objective event turned by God to our advantage, but rather to make the cross of Christ our own ... In its redemptive aspect the cross of Christ is ... a permanent historical fact originating in the past historical event which is the crucifixion of Jesus."* In his frustration with liberal scepticism and his despair that we can ever recapture the historical Jesus Bultmann seeks a dynamic faith which becomes ultra-subjective and which is based, in effect, on the by now traditional idea of discontinuity between Jesus as he was and the theologically modelled Christ of the primitive kerygma. So, for instance, he allows himself the devastating view that *"Easter Day ... is nothing else than the rise of faith in the risen Lord, since it was this faith which led to the apostolic preaching. The resurrection itself is not an event of past history."*

ii) Bultmann and existential philosophy

The potentially atheistic existentialism of Martin Heidegger colours Bultmann's approach to the New Testament although Bultmann would have repudiated the charge of atheism. Yet the

influence is there and comes out, for example, in this assertion: *"The essence of history cannot be grasped by 'viewing' it, as we view our natural environment ... When (an individual) turns his attention to history, however, he must admit himself to be a part of history ... He cannot observe this complex objectively ..."*

iii) Bultmann versus Barth

In the earlier years of the 20th Century it seemed as if Bultmann would remain no more than a disciple of Barth. Yet this was not to be. Apart from his reaction against the late-19th Century theology of immanentism, liberal scholarship and a pre-World War 1 optimistic view of human progress, Bultmann was wedded to a view which postulated a cleavage between primitive Judaistic and Hellenistic Christianity. Thus his commentary upon John's Gospel suggested the latter's dependence upon Gnostic belief. Although he agreed with Barth in reacting against the way in which liberals sifted hopefully through the Gospels in order to recover some fragments of the authentic words and deeds of Jesus and although they were at one in asserting that Jesus of Nazareth does not provide a truly historical foundation for that kerygma which sinners need so much and which compels us to decision about the Saviour, Bultmann exceeded Barth in claiming that the early-Church kerygma was not concerned with the historicity of the Gospel accounts. Barth never went quite that far.

A prime reason for the formal divorce between historicity and kerygma was the view that a historically based Gospel must be incredible for modern man, scientifically conditioned as the latter is. Ancient mythical cosmology will not stand the test of 20th Century scientific discrimination. So, in his *'Kerygma and Myth'* [ET 1953], Bultmann writes that *"a sacrifice of the intellect ... could have only one result - a curious form of schizophrenia and insincerity ... It is impossible to use*

electric lights and the wireless ... and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."

Eventually there was something of a break between the two men, Bultmann teaching his pupils (not without reason) that Barth had only dealt in a partial fashion with the underlying dialectical existentialism of his own theology and that his own (ie. Bultmann's) was more thorough-going. In fact by 1932 Barth had made a somewhat hollow rejection of existentialism. Bultmannianism, triumphant in the post-2nd World War period, was effectively an amalgam of the old liberalism and a Christianised existentialism, a perfectly understandable union between discontinuity and subjectivism.

iv. Bultmann's historiography

Bultmann's understanding of the nature of history needs to be noted because, as a senior patriarch of form criticism, he retained certain definite views of history when approaching documents which claim to be historically accurate.

For Bultmann history was a bypath leading away from the dominant concept of existential encounter and mutual adaptation between oneself and the kerygma.

He insisted that our relationship to history is quite different from our relationship to nature. While man is not a part of nature, which he can view objectively, he is a part of the flow of history, the examination of which involves existential dialogue or interpenetration. To quote Bultmann, the only form of history is to regard Jesus "*as a part of the history in which we have our being, or in which by critical conflict we achieve being*".

He denied the propriety of making value judgments about alleged historic events, claiming that "*The dialogue (with history) does not come*

as a conclusion, as a kind of evaluation of history, after one has learned the objective facts. On the contrary, the actual encounter with history takes place only in the dialogue."

With regard to Jesus, Bultmann finds it impossible to know whether Jesus held himself to be the Messiah or not and considers that the question of Messianic self-consciousness is unimportant. Like that of any other man, the work of Jesus is to be defined as *"the end they really sought, and it is in connection with their purpose that they are the proper objects of historical investigation."* Yet how can we define the end which Jesus sought if we cannot discover whether or not He believed Himself to be the Messiah? But such questions would not worry Bultmann unduly. Indeed, for him historicity can be dangerous because preoccupation in this area can come between the believer and the Christ of the kerygma: *"God withholds Himself from view and observation. We can believe in God only in spite of experience, just as we can accept justification only in spite of conscience. Indeed, de-mythologizing is a task parallel to that performed by Paul and Luther in their doctrine of justification by faith alone without the works of law."*

5. Assumptions of Form Criticism

The various influences underlying the form-critical approach to the Gospels work themselves out in a series of logical, inter-related propositions, some of which seem to be as follows:-

i. Between the lifetime of Jesus and the completion of the Gospels as they now exist there was a quite distinct period of oral transmission of material concerning the life and times of Jesus.

ii. That with the notable exception of the Passion narratives and certain other accounts, these oral 'packets' circulated in the primitive

Church as self-contained and not necessarily related units.

iii. That these units may be classified in various literary patterns. Bultmann himself identified the following separate forms, which collectively tell us a great deal about the original life-settings or Sitz im Leben of the early Christians:

Miracle stories - miracles without teaching material attached.

Apothegms - brief narratives ending with a saying of Jesus.

Legends - because the early Christians were interested in other people as well as Jesus they formed legends about them (eg. Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration.)

Myths - by which Bultmann means the expression of spiritual reality in terms of human experience (eg. the descending dove). While myth is not necessarily unhistorical, it is normally accepted as such.

The sayings of Jesus - wisdom words, 'I' words, prophetic and apocalyptic sayings, law words, rules and parables.

In most of these sayings of Jesus any surviving logia may be recognised principally where a call to decision is to be discerned (such as in the parables) and where it is felt by the critic that there was no need for the early community to create fresh material in its own interests. All in all, Bultmann accepts some forty sayings only as genuine. Yet, for philosophical reasons, this paucity does not matter very much to him.

iv. That the practical interests of the primitive Christian communities produced these forms.

Dibelius held that missionary enterprise in the early Church was, in fact, the dominant influence in the structuring of the forms. The needs of the early kerygma demanded authenticating narrative for use by three allegedly separate types of Christian worker - preachers, teachers and narrators. While Dibelius held that interpretative material was produced by the Church to faithfully represent the teaching of Jesus, Bultmann went much further and ascribed a purely inventive genius to the communities. So for him the plucking of the ears of corn is basically a product of the post-Easter Church in defence of a relaxed attitude to the Jewish Sabbath.

v. That the initial forms which underly the Gospels may be recovered by dint of critical examination. This means that the extant material less original forms roughly approximates to the authentic teaching of Jesus.

vi. For Bultmann and other radical form-critics it has been axiomatic that these traditional forms have no chronological or geographical value. Thus the historicity of the Gospels is even further impoverished.

vii. That the authenticity of apparent 'eye-witness' material in the Gospels is to be largely discounted, being a product of the theological creativity of the early Church.

viii. That the developed Christology of the New Testament does not find its roots in the teaching of Jesus. Bultmann's denial of the historical resurrection, already mentioned, demonstrates this clearly.

ix. In keeping with the idea of early-Church creativity, Bultmann upheld the old liberal notion of a cleavage between Hellenistic and Jewish Christianity. Thus he writes concerning Matthew 5:17-19 that it "*records the attitude of the conservative Palestinian community in*

contrast to that of the Hellenists."

6. Form Criticism Criticised

Writing in 1966 Carl Henry commented that "Today the search is under way for an alternative to Bultmann ... We can chart this search for an alternative to Bultmann in three steps: first, the revolt of Bultmann's disciples against Bultmann; second, the sharp disagreement among the post-Bultmannians themselves; third, the growing vitality of the anti-Bultmannians."

Ernst Kasemann criticised Bultmann's existential approach initially in the early fifties by asserting that although it is not possible to produce a psychological and chronological reconstruction of the life of Jesus, a total or near-complete rejection of Gospel historicity opens the existential critic to the charge of Docetism, the early heresy which divorced Christian faith from the historic God-man of the four Gospels. Accordingly, Christianity becomes in effect a Gnostic redemption-myth. Kasemann was not alone, and thus has arisen in very recent times the European Heilsgeschichte School of New Testament scholarship, usually referred to in England as the 'New Quest of the Historical Jesus', the title of a 1959 publication by J.M. Robinson. Such names as Pannenberg, Cullmann, Nygren and Thielicke are prominent among researchers of a somewhat less liberal viewpoint. As R.A. Finlayson expresses it: "*The claim made by Form Criticism that the New Testament does not provide a reliable report of the historical Jesus is now weakening before a recognition of the continuity of the teaching of the primitive Church with that of Jesus and the apostles.*"

We may summarise certain criticisms which must be faced by the form-critical approach to the Gospels:

- i. The alleged dichotomy between oral and

written transmission of authentic material is arguably unproven, unjustified and unnecessary. While material must have been handed down verbally (eg. Galatians 1:18), the deeds and dicta of Jesus would have been committed to writing at a very early date (eg. Luke 1:1f). The accuracy of recorded eye-witness testimony cannot be discounted.

ii. The whole Bultmannian concept of early-Church creativity is entirely vulnerable. If the primitive communities did not derive their refined Christology from the life, deeds, death and resurrection of the historical Jesus, from what source did it come? It must have come from somewhere. Equally, why should the early Church have built a developed Christology and a virtually systematised form of religion upon a man who, as alleged by Bultmann, did not really know whether or not he was the Messiah. These related questions of derivation and motivation must be answered. D. Guthrie pertinently asks if the early martyrs would have suffered and died for a Saviour born of community-inspiration. This is an entirely proper query. Form critical assumptions lose credibility when, for example, we read the early martyrologies.

iii. Recent historical research, and especially the discovery of the Qumran literature, has helped to close or even cancel the alleged gap between early Jewish and Hellenistic Christianity, thus weakening the idea of discontinuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of the kerygma.

iv. The ethics of a supposed primitive Church theological inventiveness are disreputable, yet an examination of this issue does not, it would seem, loom large in the usual form-critical expositions. If invention/false attribution is the same thing as perversion, does not form-criticism lose much of its credibility?

v. Form-criticism was born of a dissatisfaction with the late 19th Century liberal approach to the

historic Jesus and with various open-ended documentary source hypotheses. Yet form-criticism has been no more successful than they in solving the question of Gospel origins.

vi. Bultmannian historiography will not bear criticism. He separates science and history without adequate grounds, at the same time requiring a presuppositionless approach to history while accepting a sort of subjective competence in the approach. When this is worked out it means that the observer will lecture history rather than history lecture the observer. In either case there can hardly be any question of the give and take of dialogue. Further, existential philosophy, divorced from historicity, is meaningless and void. If a Christian dialogue with history is principally submission to the teaching and lordship of the man Christ Jesus, then let us by all means pursue such a dialogue. If, on the other hand, we cannot treat with the historic Jesus then the achievement of being by dialogue is nonsensical phraseology. Whatever can it mean? A kerygma, even an apostolic kerygma, not based squarely upon historical realities is incredible for us. Not only do we not know how and why the kerygma was developed originally, we fail to see why we should respond to it today in terms of repentance and faith.

vii. It is true that the post-Easter Church developed its theology. Yet this was under the direction of the glorified Christ and was based on the factuality of the incarnation and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (eg. John 14:25, Acts 1:1 et al.) Development means continuity, not disjunction. Not only do the Gospels compel us to gaze upon and believe in a man amongst men, the letters, Acts and Revelation drive us even further in our interpretation and application of all that He did and said. If there is nothing static in the New Testament's portrayal of Jesus,

neither is there anything staccato. Moreover, the New Testament calls us to faith and then speaks to the faithful. Conversion ('decision' in the Bultmannian vernacular) is not the only theme.

viii. The form-critical approach comes from a school of thought which was far from unbiased in its approach to the Gospels. This paper has tried to point out the essential continuum connecting rationalistic criticism and speculative philosophy over a large number of years. The neo-Biblicism of Barthian theology and the reassuring phrases coming from post-Bultmannian developments should not veil the fact that, historically, much liberal criticism has been and is offered by writers who have seemed to possess an entirely inadequate conception of God. The vocabulary of Barthian crisis theology and existential 'reality' relates far more to old fashioned secular subjectivism (ie. unbelief) than to evangelical Christianity. It is no surprise that the message of this philosophy is discontinuity, the notion that the theology of 'Acts' onwards plus the alleged accretions which have found their way into the Gospels cannot be an inscripturated and inspired revelation from the transcendent yet immanent God of all grace. To the Christianised existentialist there can be no such God. He would wish to reason that the kerygma, not coming from the Jesus of history, must have been produced by the Church without supernatural interposition and was so produced for the purposes of self-justification and expansion. This is the rationale beneath form-criticism in its most accentuated presentations. It asks us to bravely confront the contrived and unhistorical Christ of the kerygma and then seems to tell us that we can and even should rediscover a more or less authentic, demythologised, Jesus. Where do we stand? What or whom do we want? What is our need? In the final analysis Bultmannian form-criticism is irresolute. All is uncertain.

ix. Finally, Bultmann is on record as denying the physical resurrection of the Lord. It seems such a pity that so many scholarly writings about the New Testament apparently consider him as a constructive and helpful authority always to be referred to in the realm of Gospel origins, a subject as truly fascinating as it is important. Take account of his views and those of his school we must, yet at the same time we bear in mind some relevant apostolic advice: "*For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you*" [1 Corinthians 11:19].

BOOK REVIEWS

The Evangelical Succession in the Church of

England edited by D.N.Samuel. Published by James Clarke £2.75

'*The Evangelical Succession*' comprises seven addresses given in 1977 at the Lincoln conference of the Protestant Reformation Society. According to the Introduction the purpose of the conference was to go back to the roots of evangelicalism and reformed teaching in the Church of England in order, firstly, to give evangelicals in the C of E a sense of identity at a time when there is an element of uncertainty about the distinctive marks of evangelicalism, and secondly, to give a sense of continuity with those in the past who held the same biblical doctrines and thirdly, to give encouragement by the remembrance of the triumph of God's truth in previous days.

The fundamental argument of the book is stated by Rev D.N.Samuel in the Introduction: "*What we recognize in the Reformers is the teaching of the Church of England.*" The Church may have lost