

THREE

Preaching and the Bible

We begin with the thesis that if our preaching is to be *Christian* preaching, it has to be *biblical* preaching. Such a thesis almost sounds like a truism. And yet this is most certainly not so, for there have been many periods in the history of the Christian church in which preaching was far from biblical. In the Middle Ages, for instance, preaching was often a moralizing tale rather than a biblical exposition. The Reformation of the sixteenth century changed this and put preaching back on a squarely biblical basis. The famous statement of the *Second Helvetic Confession* not only says that the preaching of the Word of God *is* the Word of God, but also indicates what it means by "the preaching of the Word of God". For in the next sentence this is interpreted as follows: "When *this Word of God* (= Scripture) is preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful" (chapter I). A few years earlier the Reformed Church of France had already stated in its first *Liturgy*: "For the message of salvation, the minister in his preaching will take some text in Holy Scripture and read it fully, as Jesus did in Nazareth. After the reading, he will speak, not desultorily, but on the passage read, introducing passages which are in Scripture and which are useful in the exposition of Scripture, which he will explain without departing from Holy Scripture. This he will do in order not to mix the pure Word of God with the refuse of men, faithfully com-

municating the Word and speaking the Word of God only."¹ Likewise the *Thirty-Nine Articles* state in art. XIX (which is clearly based on art. VII of the *Augsburg Confession*): "The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached", and it is further evident from the articles VI and XX that this pure Word of God is to be the Word which we find in Holy Scripture.

Fortunately, this has always remained the fundamental view in the tradition of the Reformation, both on the European continent and in the Anglo-Saxon world. In my own Dutch Reformed tradition the great work on *Reformed Homiletics* by one of my predecessors in the seminary at Kampen, T. Hoekstra, reiterated again and again: "Preaching is the exposition and application of Holy Scripture."² Karl Barth, who stood in the Swiss Reformed tradition, also never tired of emphasizing this same point. For the evangelical Anglican tradition I would like to quote Dr. D.B. Knox, Principal of Moore College, Sydney: "This is what preaching should consist in – exposition of the teaching of Scripture and application to life's situation."³ And I am glad to say that one of the modern confessions in the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition, *The Confession of 1967*, is also very clear on this point: "God's word is spoken to his church today where the Scriptures are faithfully preached and attentively read in dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit and with readiness to receive their truth and direction" (9.30).

This emphasis on Christian preaching as biblical preaching is in full conformity with Scripture itself. When Paul writes to Timothy about the 'sacred writings', he adds:

¹Quoted from Pierre Ch. Marcel, *The Relevance of Preaching*, 1963, 58/59.

²T. Hoekstra, *Gereformeerde Prediking* (1962), 157, 160, 161, 162, 163.

³David Broughton Knox, *Thirty-Nine Articles*, 1967, 24. Cf. also E.A. Litton, *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology*, 1960, 430: "To us who live in these latter times, the inspired volume is the only authentic source of what the preacher has to deliver.....The preacher, therefore, ought to be, above all things, an expositor of Scripture." In *Knots Untied* Bishop J.C. Ryle writes: "In complete public worship there should be the *preaching of God's Word*. I can find no record of Church assemblies in the New Testament in which preaching and teaching orally does not occupy a most prominent position. It appears to me to be the chief instrument by which the Holy Ghost not only awakens sinners, but also leads on and establishes saints", 1959, 197.

“which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ”. And then there follows the well-known statement about the inspiration and purpose of Scripture: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:15–17). Actually, this description of the purpose of the Bible is an equally valid description of the purpose of preaching. For that is what preaching is for: teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness. We may go a step further and say that the Scriptures, having such a purpose, are themselves documents of preaching. This has been generally recognized in our century. In his famous lectures, quoted above, Forsyth put it thus: “The great reason why the preacher must return continually to the Bible is that the Bible is the greatest sermon in the world. Above every other function of it the Bible is a sermon, a *kerygma*, a preachment. It is the preacher’s book because it is the preaching book.”⁴ In it we hear the voices of prophets and apostles proclaiming to the people of their own time the great acts of God in the history of Israel and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who as the Son of God incarnate is the true son of Israel. And these prophets and apostles invite the church of today to continue this proclamation to the people of today.

The church, however, can do this only when she has a good and proper view of this prophetic and apostolic witness. But exactly here we encounter the great problem of our day. For many, many centuries there was complete unanimity on this point. Even the Reformation did not break up this unanimity. On the contrary! Although there were many sharp differences between Rome and the Reformation, even concerning the place and function of the

⁴P.T. Forsyth, *op. cit.*, 6. Cf. also the New Testament scholar Willi Marxsen who calls the New Testament “the oldest preserved sermon collection of the church” (Willi Marxsen, *Der Exeget als Theologe*, 1969, 126). Marxsen adds to these words: “but not the preaching text”. According to him the preaching text lies behind the New Testament texts, although he does not deny that the latter, at least in part, has entered into the former. This, to me, is a false dilemma. Cf. also Werner Daniëlmeyer, ‘Der Text des Neuen Testaments als Grundlage unserer Predigt’, *Monatschrift für Pastoraltheologie*, 50(1961), 193–201.

Bible in the church, they were nevertheless all agreed on the nature of Scripture. As far as this is concerned the *Second Helvetic Confession* spoke not only for the churches of the Reformation but for the Church of Rome as well, when it declared in its opening statement: "We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men. For God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures."^{4a}

In our day this situation has changed completely. Admittedly, Karl Barth and his followers have tried to recover and retain the idea of the Bible as the Word of God by actualizing it. Although in itself not more than a fallible human witness, the Bible may *become* the Word of God, "where and when it pleases God". But then it really *is* the Word of God. Within this context Barth did not hesitate to call the Bible the second form of the Word of God. Today, however, many theologians of the post-Barthian era are rather critical of this neo-orthodox view. James Barr, for instance, declares in the *Supplementary Volume to The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*: "This scheme, for all its fine balance, has received less attention in recent years. Though theologically impressive, it has seemed to offer little help in solving actual interpretative problems within biblical scholarship."⁵ In other words, the exegete cannot do much with this nice 'scheme'. Of course, Barr himself also sees the Bible as a special book. He is even prepared to speak of its authority, of the Bible as "something binding upon us".⁶ Indeed, he even uses the term 'inspiration' again. "There must be some sense in which it is meaningful to say that it comes from God."⁷ But all these terms are immediately thoroughly relativized, when he says that the concept of inspiration must be so framed as to accept the historical inaccuracies and contradictions in the Bible, yes even the theological imperfection,⁸

^{4a}Arthur Cochrane, op. cit., 224.

⁵James Barr, in his article on 'Scripture, authority of', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (IDB), Supplementary Volume*, 1976, 795.

⁶Art. cit., 795.

⁷Art. cit., 794.

⁸Art. cit., 794.

and when a little later he adds that authority does not exclude theological errors.⁹

Many other articles in the same dictionary, which in many ways is representative of present-day biblical scholarship, show a similar approach to Scripture. They speak of a rich pluralism within the Bible. By this term they mean that there are many, often conflicting theological standpoints in the Bible.¹⁰ It is therefore necessary to apply 'content criticism' (German: *Sachkritik*) to the Bible. We may have to weigh Paul's words against what he says elsewhere, or we may have to evaluate various elements or stages of the gospel tradition against each other.¹¹ There is also much uncertainty as to the historical accounts of the Bible. "In some cases what actually happened may be quite different from any biblical account of it. For example, although we have four accounts of the trial of Jesus, what actually took place may have been quite different; after all, none of the disciples was there."¹²

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For those in the evangelical tradition such a view of Scripture and its authority is entirely unacceptable. The reason is not that they deny the problems posed by the exegesis of Scripture, but they believe that the only proper starting point for any doctrine of Scripture is that of *faith in Scripture*. Or to put it in other words, we have to begin with the *self-testimony* of Scripture itself.

There can be little doubt what this self-testimony is. Orthodoxy has always pointed quite rightly to the attitude

⁹Art. cit., 795.

¹⁰L.E. Keck and G.M. Tucker, in their article on 'Exegesis', *IDB, Suppl. Vol.*, 1976, 302ff. I give two quotations from page 302. "Critical exegesis has shown that the Bible includes not only a long development but a rich pluralism, and that both Testaments contain internal critiques." "Critical exegesis has made it impossible to speak of the theology of the OT or the NT. Attempts to ascertain a single overarching theme, such as 'salvation history', or a particular understanding of human existence, do not justice to the whole range of biblical material; they only express particular viewpoints in modern theology."

¹¹Art. cit., 301.

¹²Art. cit., 301.

of Christ to the Scriptures of the Old Testament. It is clear from the Gospels that he unquestioningly accepted these Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God. The same attitude is taken by the apostles and the other authors of the New Testament. There are even within the New Testament itself some very clear, unambiguous statements about the origin, nature and purpose of the Old Testament Scriptures, which the church through the centuries has regarded as decisive. We may cite 2 Tim. 3:16 – “All Scripture is inspired of God”, and 2 Peter 1:21 – “No prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” The last passage in particular is important. It says that these men, moved by the Spirit (literally: born along by him, as a ship by the wind) spoke “from God” (*apotheu*). Their message did not originate in their own heart, but its origin was in God Himself. On the basis of all these data only one conclusion is possible. We must maintain that the Spirit so guided these writers, not only in their intentions but also in the results of their labour, that what they wrote is the fully reliable and necessary foundation of the church and the highest and decisive norm for its faith and life.

Yet this is not all that is to be said here. However true it is that the Bible is the *very Word of God* for us, at the same time we must also acknowledge that it is the Word of God *in the words of men*. The Bible was not written in heaven but on earth. As Peter put it: *men* spoke from God. Some readers may say: “But conservatives have never denied this”. This is true. But it is equally true that they often neglected or even refused to draw the appropriate consequences from it. Too often they virtually held a mechanical view of inspiration, even though with their mouths they confessed an organic view. Usually this became particularly manifest in their interpretation of the historical parts of Scripture. Too often ‘historical’ was identified with literal accuracy.¹³ In recent years it has increasingly become evident that such a view is

¹³In 1926 there was a controversy about the interpretation of Gen. 3 in my own denomination, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Synod solved the problem by declaring that the trees and the serpent in Gen. 3 were “observable by sensory perception”.

untenable. Take, for instance, the words and/or deeds of our Lord. There are obvious differences between the various accounts in the four Gospels. The Lord's Prayer is recorded in two different versions. The so-called Sermon on the Mount as recorded by Matthew differs in many details from what we read in Luke. While the Synoptic Gospels record the cleansing of the temple at the end of Jesus' ministry, the Gospel of John records it at the beginning. In the past, conservatives were inclined to explain these differences by assuming that Jesus would have spoken similar words on different occasions or that there would have been two cleansings of the temple. Today we should nearly all agree that this is a highly improbable solution. We have come to realize more and more that the Gospel writers were not notaries public, but, under the guidance of the Spirit, they had the freedom to record the words and deeds of Christ in such a way that the proclamation of the gospel was the better served. In fact, we begin to realize more and more that the composition of many books of the Bible, especially of the Old Testament, has been a very complicated affair. In many cases these books are the final result of a long historical tradition, which may have been oral, or written, or both.

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In recent years this realization has led many conservative scholars to a more positive appreciation of the so-called *historical-critical research of Scripture*.¹⁴ In the past, the conservative attitude to this kind of research was generally very hostile. This was not surprising either, for the presuppositions of many critics were wholly unscriptural (usually they were both positivistic and evolutionary in nature) leading as a consequence to very negative results. The recent change in attitude among conservatives has several grounds.

(1) We have come to realize more and more that *all* sound

¹⁴Cf. George Eldon Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism*, 1967. K. Runia, *Prediking en Historisch-Kritisch Onderzoek*, 1972. *New Testament interpretation. Essays on Principles and Methods* (ed. by I. Howard Marshall), 1977.

exegesis is critical in nature. Exegesis always means "comparison and judgment based on publicly accessible evidence and principles".¹⁵ As a matter of fact, conservative scholars have always used these very same means and, like other exegetes, have often reached differing conclusions, for the simple reason that they "weighed the evidence differently and had varying sensibilities and insights".¹⁶

(2) We have discovered that most of the presuppositions and assumptions underlying the older and the current historical criticisms are not essential to and inherent in the historical-critical method as such, but are the result of the theological and philosophical ideas which the scholars themselves bring to and introduce within their research.¹⁷

(3) We have discovered that historical criticism, no less than literary criticism, has enriched our understanding of Scripture. Here we can mention only a few points.

(a) It appears that the vast majority of the Bible books have a *long and complicated history* behind them. Or to put it differently, many texts are actually multi-layered. This is quite evident in the Synoptic Gospels. Assuming that the Gospel according to Mark is the oldest Gospel we know, we must conclude that both Matthew and Luke have made use of Mark. But Mark himself made use of the preceding oral tradition, which in many ways was a preaching tradition. This oral tradition, in its turn, goes back to Jesus himself. In the Old Testament we find similar situations. The author of Chronicles undoubtedly made use of the existent books of Samuel and Kings. The authors of these books, in their turn, made use of earlier written and oral traditions. Sometimes we can clearly observe how the final authors and/or redactors have used their sources, and this can give us a much clearer insight into the intentions of the final author and/or

¹⁵Article on 'Exegesis' in *IDB, Suppl. Vol.*, 297.

¹⁶Art. cit., 297.

¹⁷In his article on 'Form Criticism, OT' G.M. Tucker rightly writes: "It is a procedure, not a theology or an ideology, although it, like any other method, will entail a certain hermeneutic of language and particular assumptions concerning man, the world, knowledge, and perhaps even God" (*IDB, Suppl. Vol.*, 342). This is undoubtedly true, but it is equally true that the contents of these assumptions are largely determined by the *total* theology (or philosophy or ideology) of the exegete.

redactor. In other words, we get a much better understanding of the Bible text, on which we have to preach!

(b) It further appears that the author in his writing always had a *certain community of believers in view* and wanted to offer a *response to concrete occasions* in the life of this community. Even when he used existent material, either in written or in oral form, he rarely contented himself with simply copying this material, but he usually selected, ordered, reshaped and interpreted it in order to meet the needs of the community. The Gospels, for example, are not simply collections of existent traditions about Jesus, but each evangelist used the material in such a way that it met the needs of the community for which he wrote. The Pauline Epistles, without a single exception (not even the Epistle to the Romans!) are all occasional letters, i.e., letters occasioned by certain conditions, sometimes even crises, in the churches. The historical books of the Old Testament, too, show the same feature. They are not simply historical records of past events in the life of Israel, but each author used, ordered, reshaped the existent material in such a way that it contained a clear message for the believing community of his own day. At later stages the books often went through several redactions, which usually meant an actualizing or even re-actualizing of older materials for the sake of the believers of the new period.¹⁸ It will be evident again that it will greatly enrich our preaching, when we can discover how and for what purpose the final redactor shaped the material in this particular way.

(c) Another important contribution made by historical criticism is the insight that the writers often used existing church traditions *against* the church. Leander E. Keck has emphasized this strongly in his book, *The Bible in the Pulpit*. He even calls the Bible an "anti-church book".¹⁹ "Anti-church", as used by him, does not mean sheer hostility, but "a trenchant critique of the church as it was actually developing". In this sense one could call the New Testament "a series of twenty-seven minority reports". The New Testament writers do not simply record or repeat the tradition of

¹⁸We shall discuss this at greater length in Chapter V.

¹⁹Leander E. Keck, *op. cit.*, 1978, 90.

the young church, but use this tradition as a fundamental critique of what is happening in the young church. Again, it is evident how fruitful this insight will be for our present-day preaching of the Gospel. Today's minister should follow this example and confront his congregation in the same way with the biblical tradition as a critique.

We realize, of course, that making use of the various critical methods makes the exegetical task of the minister much more difficult and exacting. But we also believe that it becomes much more rewarding. In many cases the message, peculiar to this particular text, will come out much more clearly. In the past conservative/evangelical preaching has too often been superficial. The words of a particular text (quite often a very short text was chosen, sometimes only one verse or even a part of one verse) were used more or less at face value, and the real message was inspired by the minister's own doctrinal insights rather than by the actual message of the text itself. Whatever our critique of the newer exegetical methods may be, it cannot be denied that they compel us to study our text carefully and to wrestle with it until it has given us its own particular message. We are forced to dig into the text until we have found an answer to such questions as: Why did the author write as he did? What did he want to communicate to his readers in their particular situation? Today's preacher can become a truly biblical preacher only when he takes these questions utterly seriously.

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The clause, 'whatever our critique of the newer exegetical methods may be', demands some explanation: it would be regrettable if the argument so far had created the impression that I recommend the acceptance of the historical-critical methods lock, stock and barrel. As a matter of fact, I do not recommend this at all. As has already been stated, these methods are often used within a framework of theological and/or philosophical presuppositions and assumptions which are foreign to, or even worse, which are inimical to

the very nature of the Scriptures. We have already referred to the denial of the unity of the Scriptures and to the relativizing of their inspiration and authority by many contemporary theologians. They simply accept a theological pluralism in Scripture and therefore see it as the task of the exegete to resort to what they call 'content criticism' (German: *Sachkritik*) of the Scriptures.

All this is usually connected with some other presuppositions and assumptions. In spite of the failure of both the old²⁰ and the new²¹ quest for the historical Jesus, it is still quite common for critical scholars to defend the thesis that the *actual message lies behind the text*. In recent years this has been strongly advocated by *Wolfhart Pannenberg*.²² He sees two big differences between Luther (and the Reformers in general) and us. Luther still believed in the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture, i.e. he believed that the most important or essential content (German: *die Sache*) arises clearly and univocally from its words, when they are expounded in accord with sound principles.²³ According to Pannenberg we can no longer uphold this. In the first place, we have discovered the distance between the intellectual milieu of the text and that of our own time. Secondly, we have also discovered that we have to distinguish between the attested events themselves and the tendencies in the reporting of the individual biblical writers. This second discovery means that the 'essential content', the '*Sache*' of Luther, *viz.* the person and history of Jesus, is no longer to be found *in* the texts themselves, but must be discovered *behind* them.²⁴

We believe that this whole approach is impossible and fruitless. In the Bible *event and interpretation are inseparable*. We know the events only in and by means of the interpretative accounts, and these interpretative accounts are accounts

²⁰Cf. A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 2nd edition, 1931.

²¹Cf. the section on the historical Jesus question, in *IDB, Suppl. Vol.*, 103f., which begins with the words: "The failure to achieve clear results in the so called new quest of the historical Jesus".

²²Cf. his article 'The Crisis of the Scripture Principle', in *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vol. I, 1970, 1-14.

²³*Op. cit.*, 5.

²⁴*Op. cit.*, 7.

of the events. So far as the so-called historical Jesus is concerned, we cannot possibly separate him from the Christ of faith who is proclaimed by the New Testament writers. Keck, who believes that the historical Jesus can be preached "as a catalytic question, as one who sets in motion reflection about the deepest questions of life before God and who calls for response"²⁵, nevertheless has to admit: "The Evangelists of course did not present the historical Jesus in distinction from the church's traditions about Jesus – for the simple reason that the distinction never occurred to them and that a historically ascertained (in our sense) Jesus was not available to them even if it had." But if this is true, how then should such a historical Jesus ever be available to us who are historically so much further removed from this Jesus? And even if our modern methods allowed us to discover him (which in fact they do not)²⁶ what would be the use of this Jesus if he is separated from the Christ of faith? Moreover, would not the historical Jesus likewise demand faith in himself as the One sent by God? Would this not mean that even *as* the historical Jesus he always *is* the Christ of faith?

Connected with the foregoing is the view, quite common among the critics, that the preacher can and may preach on any of the *layers* of tradition which he finds behind the present text. Kurt Frör, for example, says concerning the multi-layered tradition of the Old Testament that there are several possibilities for the preacher. He can take the oldest layer, i.e., the text as it lies before us. Or he can choose to show the congregation that there are several layers, i.e., he can preach on the developing text.²⁷ The same would apply to the New Testament.²⁸ The preacher can take the final text of Matthew or Luke, or he can go back to Mark, or to Q (= *Quelle* – source), or – behind this – to the oral tradition, or to

²⁵Leander E. Keck, *op. cit.*, 135. He goes on to say that "the historical Jesus can elicit this questioning precisely where the church's Christ wouldn't even get a hearing" and mentions as an impressive illustration "the beautiful book" by the Marxist Milan Machovec: *A Marxist Looks at Jesus*, 1976.

²⁶Cf. the article on 'Biblical Criticism NT', in *IDB Suppl. Vol.*, 103f.

²⁷Kurt Frör, *Biblische Hermeneutik. Zur Schriftauslegung in Predigt und Unterricht*, 1964, 151. It should be noted that Frör also calls for caution. "We should not make such attempts rashly, Luke 14:28." As a matter of fact, the general rule should be to use the final form, i.e., the present text.

²⁸*Op. cit.*, 250f.

the early Christian prophecy, or to the words of the historical Jesus.²⁹ But how must the preacher choose? The criterion cannot simply be the historical aspect. Frör himself rejects the contrasts authentic-unauthentic, earlier-later, original-secondary as invalid. Not even the *ipsissima vox Jesu* (the actual words of Jesus) is decisive. Frör himself recommends a twofold criterion. 1. Content criticism. The preacher must ask himself which layer of the tradition does most justice to the *Sache* (the essential content) with which the New Testament is concerned. 2. The situation of the congregation. The preacher must ask himself which layer of the tradition shows a situation that is most analogous to the situation of his own congregation.³⁰

We believe that there are several *serious objections* against this view. (1) Who is going to decide what is the *Sache*? Is it Frör? Is it you? Is it me? But on what basis are we to decide? Frör himself rejects the idea of a 'canon within the canon' (e.g., Luther's doctrine of justification). But can he really avoid this solution? Does he not have to determine, one way or another, what is the *Sache* in order to apply this to the various layers? But does this not lead to the famous vicious circle? (2) We may not forget that Tradition Criticism often is little more than a matter of scholarly hypothesis. Only rarely do we have absolute certainty. It is therefore not surprising to see that quite often different scholars arrive at different results. But can one preach God's Word on the basis of a scholarly hypothesis? (3) If we select earlier layers we will preach on something that is *not* in the text. At times it may even mean that we will have to preach on something that is quite different from what the present text says. Supposing, for instance, one wants to preach on the earlier layers of Gen. 32:22-32, as these are assumed by many scholars? According to them the original story is a pre-Israelite saga about some river-demon. The next stage would be a story about Jacob meeting a strange, demonic power, called El, which threatens to kill him, but which is conquered by

²⁹*Op. cit.*, 251 Cf. also Leander E. Keck, *op. cit.*, 110, 134.

³⁰*Op. cit.*, 252. Cf. also L. E. Keck and G. M. Tucker, article on 'Exegesis' in *IDB, Suppl. Vol.*, 303, and Friedrich Winter in the section on 'Die Predigt', in *Handbuch der Praktischen Theologie* (produced by Heinrich Ammer a.o.), Vol. II, 1974, 248ff.

Jacob. The following stage would be the story of a mysterious encounter between Jacob and Yahweh who blesses Jacob before he re-enters the promised land.³¹ But can a preacher really preach on the first two layers, when it is clear that the final layer (i.e. the text as it now stands) completely discards all references to a river-demon or a strange, daemonic power? Would preaching on the earlier layers not be disobedience to the sacred text as it has been delivered to us under the guidance of the Holy Spirit? In my opinion there is *only one preaching text*, namely, the canonical Bible text. It was apparently the intention of the Holy Spirit to give this text to the church on its journey through the ages. In this text we find the message which the church of all ages needs. This does not mean that all traditio-critical research is useless. Even though its results are largely hypothetical, especially where very early traditions are concerned, they do have a certain value, in particular when they enable us to see more clearly how and why the final text received its present form. Such an insight often gives the preacher a clue how today he must actualize or even re-actualize the message of the text.

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In this connection, we cannot pass by the latest developments in the field of exegesis. Under the influence of modern linguistics and following the impact of present-day liberation movements, a new exegetical method is becoming very popular, namely, *structuralism*. In many ways this new method is also a reaction to the often hypothetical and purely academic results of historical criticism. The structuralists concentrate on the text as it lies before us.³² Contrary to

³¹Cf. J. de Fraine S. J., *Genesis uit de grondtekst vertaald en uitgelegd*, 1963, *ad locum*. Cf. also P.A.H. de Boer, 'Genesis XXXII 23-33, some remarks on composition and character of the story', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift*, I(1946), 149-163; F. van Trigt, 'La signification de la lutte de Jacob près du Yabboq, Gen. XXXII 23-33', *Old Testament Studies*, XII (1958), 280-309.

³²For a list of general works on structuralism, see the bibliography in *IDB, Suppl. Vol.*, 551 (article on 'Literature, the Bible as', by D. Robertson). For a more theological approach, see the collection of essays in *Interpretation* Vol. 28 (1974), April issue; D.O. Via, Jr., *Kerygma and Comedy in the New Testament: A Structuralist*

the form-critical and traditio-critical scholars who dissect the text into smaller units and trace the separate meanings of these units, the structuralists want to study the text as a whole by showing the interrelation of the units. In many ways this seems to be a wholesome reaction to the fragmentation of the text which is so characteristic of the historical-critical method. It most certainly appeals to conservative scholarship which has always been primarily interested in the message of the canonical text. On the other hand, conservative scholars should realize that most structuralists also have a low view of Scripture and share many of the assumptions of their critical counterparts. Moreover, many structuralists appear to use this method to defend the basic tenets of modern liberation theology. In many instances structuralism allies itself with the so-called materialistic exegesis,³³ which usually leads to new distortions of the biblical message.

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So far we have dealt mainly with views that are not acceptable to evangelicals and it is easy to shoot arrows at distant targets! But what about conservative and evangelical Christians? Do they really understand the *biblical message*? When I read collections of sermons published within the evangelical community, I have serious doubts. Of course, there are many sound evangelical and biblical insights and statements in these sermons. Yet on the whole they are disappointing. Sometimes they even deal with their text in an altogether unbiblical way, namely, by using nearly all texts in an anthropocentric, exemplaristic, and consequently moralizing way. Apparently a high view of Scripture does not automatically result in the right use of Scripture!

Approach to Hermeneutic, 1975; C.J. den Heyer, *Exegetische methoden in discussie*, 1978.

³³See, e.g., Fernando Belo, *Lecture Matérialiste de l'évangile de Marc*, 1974; Michel Clévenot, *Approches matérialistes de la Bible*, 1976; the special issue of *Movement* (magazine of the British S.C.M.), September 1977, with contributions by Pablo Richard and Gabriele Dietrich.

Personally I believe that the only proper way of reading (and therefore preaching) the Bible is to read it in terms of *salvation history* or *redemptive history* (*Heilsgeschichte*). The Bible is the witness of prophets and apostles to the self-revelation of the God of Israel and the Father of Jesus Christ. In it we read how the God in whom Israel believed and whom Jesus Christ called his Father, revealed himself as the Saviour and Judge in the history of the covenant people of old and in particular in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is true that in recent biblical theology this salvation-history approach has again fallen on evil times.³⁴ After the strong emphasis on the idea of 'revelation in history' in the biblical theology of the period after World War II (in the writings of e.g. Cullmann, Wright, Von Rad, Ridderbos,) recent biblical theology has begun to question this whole expression. It believes that too many ambiguities surround it. James Barr mentions several, such as: ambiguities about the nature of the revelatory events, about the sense of 'history', about the relation between revelation and history, and about the relation between revelation and the biblical text itself. This is quite an impressive list, and conservatives too have to take these problems seriously. I believe Barr is right in pointing out that the concept of revelation is much more complex than was often assumed in the past. Yet I would maintain also that this complexity may never be used to deny that God has revealed himself in the history of Israel and of Jesus Christ. And whatever ambiguities there may be, they do not alter the fact that God's self-revelation was always of two kinds: it was revelation by both word and deed. It may well be that the one-sided concentration of the earlier biblical theology on the revelation in the events of history has led to the recent demise of the concept of 'revelation in history'. Too often the assumption was that the real revelation was in the historical event and that the interpretation was added afterwards. This, however, is contrary to the biblical records themselves. They do not recognize '*nuda facta*', bare facts, which afterwards were

³⁴Cf. the article on 'Revelation in history', by James Barr, in *IDB, Suppl. Vol.*, 746-749.

interpreted so that they became facts of salvation. On the contrary, the interpretation is always seen as the un-folding of the facts themselves. The revelatory quality is the secret that is present in the event itself, and it only becomes manifest in the interpretation.

Take, for instance, the Exodus. It is not true that a band of Israelites managed to escape from Egypt and that these people *afterwards*, when they began to reflect on this event, interpreted it as a revelation of God's saving power, but from the very start this Exodus is seen as God's saving deed. In the case of the Exodus we even see that God *beforehand* announced to his servant Moses that he was going to redeem Israel (Ex. 3:7ff.). As a matter of fact, this is not an exception, but it is the normal pattern in the Old Testament. The prophetic word always precedes God's acting in history.³⁵ And even when the Old Testament does not deal explicitly with God's own acts in the history of Israel, but rather gives a prophetic, *a posteriori* interpretation of Israel's history (as we find this, for instance, in the great historical books, such as Joshua-Kings and Chronicles-Ezra), this interpretation is not read *into* the facts, but it is derived from the facts, as they are seen in the broad framework of God's covenant with Israel.

³⁵Claus Westermann says: "One can speak meaningfully about this intervention of God in history if it is connected with the Word. Those who experienced the deliverance at the Red Sea, and later generations, could *not* confess, praise, and pass on this event as an act of God, solely because they *believed* God had acted, or because they had a conviction or a feeling. They could do this only for the *sole* reason that this salvation had word-character, i.e., because this deliverance was promised them in the hour of distress, and they could therefore experience it as fulfilment of the promise, or as the happening of the predicted. This connection is of decisive importance for the understanding of the Old Testament. The fact that a historical event is witnessed to be an act of God can in the Old Testament never – at least never exclusively – be proved because the people who were involved had certain thoughts, experiences, or beliefs. This is not a sufficient foundation to carry a creed! Rather the only basis for a creed is this: that a *factum* is recognized as a *dictum*. The saving act at the Red Sea *began* with this – that a Word came to a man (Exod. 3: 7f.): 'I have *seen* the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have *heard* their cry because of their taskmaster; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians....'" Claus Westermann, 'The Interpretation of the Old Testament', in *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation* (ed. by Claus Westermann), 1963, 47f. Cf. also W. Pannenberg in *Revelation as History* (ed. by W. Pannenberg), 1968, 153: "The prophetic word precedes the act of history, and these acts are understandable as acts of Yahweh only because a statement coming in the name of Yahweh interprets them this way."

The same is true of the New Testament. There we find the same inseparable connection between event and interpretation. Whether it is *a priori* interpretation or *a posteriori* interpretation (and the latter undoubtedly predominates in the New Testament), in both cases the interpretation does not add something to the event that was not present in the event itself, but it is based on either the content or the context of the event. H.M. Kuitert rightly points out that the New Testament writers did not arbitrarily *attribute* a wonderful significance to Jesus but rather *derived* this significance from the person and work of Jesus himself. "The affair (= *die Sache*) itself and its significance are interwoven: the event does not stand apart from its significance. The interpretation of Jesus, his way and his work as the way of salvation ... comes from Jesus Himself ... Paul did not damage what Jesus accomplished. In his own way – and his way is different from that of John or the writer of Hebrews, and is more explicit than that of Jesus Himself – Paul illuminated Jesus in his person and work by means of the person and work itself."³⁶ Kuitert refers here in particular to the New Testament Epistles, but the same is true of the interpretative elements in the Gospels.³⁷



This basic structure of the Bible naturally has important *consequences* for the way we read the Bible and, therefore, also for our preaching.

1. In the first place, it means that the biblical message is *theocentric* in nature. Even though the deeds and words of men and women fill the greater part of the Bible, the real centre is what God does and says. Therefore, a sermon that entirely concentrates on the people mentioned in the text, on

³⁶H.M. Kuitert, *The Reality of Faith*, 1968, 167.

³⁷Cf. also Alan Richardson, *Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*, 1958. In another book he himself describes this Introduction as an attempt to show "that the theology of the New Testament as a whole is based primarily upon Jesus' own interpretation of his mission and person in the light of his understanding of the Old Testament", *History, sacred and profane*, 1964, 141/2.

what they do and say, is, in spite of all its good intentions, basically unbiblical. As a matter of fact, such a sermon usually amounts to little else than a moralizing address.

2. The biblical message has a basically *redemptive-historical* structure. To be sure, there are parts of the Bible that seem to lack this structure (e.g., the Psalms and the Wisdom literature), but even they have to be read against the background and within the framework of the all-overarching redemptive-historical structure. The only way to preach biblically is to recognize that "the unifying structure of Scripture is that of redemptive history ... Biblical theology both recognizes the unity and epochal structure of this history." Careful study of each period "in its own context and 'theological horizon'", shows that "each epoch has a coherent and organic structure and also that there is organic progression from period to period as the plan of God is revealed".³⁸ In other words, each passage has to be seen in its proper place in this history of salvation.

3. It follows from the foregoing that our reading of and preaching on the Bible must be *christocentric*. This third aspect represents not an addition to the theocentric nature and redemptive-historical structure of the biblical revelation, but rather constitutes their accentuation and focalization. The God about whom we hear in the Bible is the Father of Jesus Christ and the redemptive history of which the Bible speaks has its very centre in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Karl Barth was absolutely right when he said that the whole Bible is a witness to Christ, the Old Testament pointing forward to him and the New Testament pointing back to him. Or to put it in the words of Von Rad: our point of departure must always be "the belief that the same God who has revealed Himself in Christ has also left his footsteps in the history of the Old Testament covenant people - that we have to do with *one* divine discourse, here to the fathers through the prophets, there to us through Christ (Heb. 1:1)".³⁹ No sermon therefore is truly biblical which does not show that the text as part of the

³⁸Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, 1962, 75; cf. 16ff.

³⁹Gerhard von Rad, 'Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament', in *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation* (ed. by Claus Westermann), 1963, 36.

redemptive-historical revelation of God points to Christ as being the very heart of this revelation.

The question may arise here, whether in this way we can still do justice to the *human aspect* of this history of salvation. Is it not true that men and women are also involved and that they even play a very important part in the biblical texts? This is undoubtedly true and we may not and cannot ignore it. It is an indispensable aspect of revelation as redemptive-historical revelation. The God in whom we believe is the Covenant God, who wants to be the Covenant-partner of his people. When at the burning bush he gives the most profound self-revelation in the sacred Name *Yahweh* (Ex. 3:8), which means "I am who I am" or "I shall be who I shall be", this Name should not be interpreted in the abstract sense of "I am the Eternal One" (although this is also implied), but the correct interpretation is: "I am with you and shall ever be with you". And when this same God reveals himself in Jesus Christ, his incarnate Son, this revelation can be interpreted only as "*Immanuel*" – God with us (Matt. 1:23; cf. Is. 7:14). Karl Barth, therefore, was correct when he said that Christian theology is always 'theo-anthropology'.⁴⁰ Christian theology and Christian preaching are always about God and man at the same time. But – God comes first! It is always theo-anthropology and never the other way round! Salvation always comes *from* God and it comes *to* man. God himself is always the *Subject* of revelation and man is no more than the *addressee*. Yet even in this humble and subordinate role man is always present in the act of revelation and plays his own, indispensable part. This is also true of Christian preaching. Man is never the subject matter of preaching. We preach God's salvation in Jesus Christ. Yet man is never absent in this preaching, for God's salvation in Jesus Christ always concerns man and it always comes to him in his *concrete, historical situation*. Seen from this perspective man is the second focus in the ellipse of Christian preaching. In our next chapter we deal with this second focus.

⁴⁰Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, 1963, 12.