

Kêrygma and History in the Thought of Rudolf Bultmann¹

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First, a Note on Terminology

Kerygma is a noun stemming from the Greek verb “to proclaim” (*kêryssō*). As used in Christianity, it referred to the proclamation that the prophesied age of fulfillment had arrived and had reached its peak in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The noun “kerygma” before long adopted a twofold meaning, because it could refer to either the content or the act of proclamation. The latter meaning is now the more common one, but since the word denotes not so much a doctrine or dogma as a call to new life, it is open to continual reinterpretation.²

Like the English word “history,” the German *Historie* and *Geschichte* can both refer to a factual account that is available to the public and verifiable according to generally accepted standards among scholars. Yet both *Geschichte* and “history” may also refer to the significance of historical facts and thus to that which cannot be certified by public consent or verified by scholarly canons. *Historie*, however, does not; it refers only to what can be verified according to empirical standards.³

“Word,” as I shall use the term in this paper, expresses the view that God can encounter human beings in an unexpected occurrence, an event that has little to do with imparting a philosophical truth.

A Personal Retrospect⁴

I want to begin by taking up ideas that have interested me since my student days at the University of Göttingen. As a freshman I was exposed to historical criticism. I learned that the biblical account of the history of Israel has little to do with actual events. Indeed, biblical and historical Israel must be separated

1. The present essay was translated into Finnish by Matti Myllykostki and published under the title “Kerygma ja historia Rudolf Bultmannin ajattelussa,” *Vartija* 126 (2013) 87–99. I wish to thank Martha Cunningham for a final critical look at the text.

2. Adopted from Harvey, *Handbook*, 121.

3. Adopted from Harvey, *Handbook*, 138–39.

4. For the following, cf. Lüdemann, *Intolerance*, 12–13.

much as the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith must be distinguished. In the latter case, for example, only a few sayings and actions of the Galilean teacher remain. The space of a postcard would be sufficient, our teachers told us with a sly look, to list the authentic words and deeds of the historical Jesus. But early Christians, most of them known only by aliases, fabricated large portions of the gospel narratives and the book of Acts. Seeing themselves as spokespersons of the risen Christ, they did this to answer burning problems that arose in their congregations as well as to defend the church against non-believing Jews and the officials of the Roman Empire.

Historical criticism of this sort provided a great liberation from the burden of tradition. Proceeding empirically, critically, and with great enthusiasm, I followed the history of Israel and the rise of the Christian church without recourse to the fictions of an authoritarian faith that resorted to miracles instead of offering natural explanations.

I am especially grateful to my teachers for enabling me to recognize that in the final analysis the central doctrine of Christianity, Jesus' resurrection from the dead, was an *interpretation* of Jesus' death. For thus it was that I overcame any lingering anxieties about eternal punishments: the mythological worldview that included resurrection, Second Coming, and final judgment collapsed once and for all. Perhaps the key advantage of a critical view of the Bible is that one can easily communicate its meaning to almost any reasonable person, whereas an interpretive scheme that relies on revelation can for the most part be mediated only to people who have already adopted a supernatural view of reality.

To my considerable surprise, the same teachers who opened my eyes to the real origins of Christianity considered theology to be chiefly an exercise in interpretation of scripture⁵, and saw their own work as service devoted to the church.

Consider, for example, Georg Strecker's statement in the preface to his Hermeneia commentary, *The Johannine Letters*: "It is true of this commentary on the Johannine Letters, . . . that its proper goal is not scholarly discussion, but the unity of theory and praxis in service of the church's preaching."⁶

Accordingly, Bultmann's pupils found it necessary to place restrictions on the historical approach. In the final analysis, they argued, it is illegitimate to deal with the history behind the New Testament as an independent topic, "for any reconstruction of the situations and events behind the texts is legitimate only insofar as it remains subordinate to and supportive of the New Testament proclamation."⁷ In short, a New Testament theologian must face unflinchingly the theological claim of the various texts and thereby avoid the mistake of liberal exegetes who supposedly have sold out theology to the lesser claims of history.

5. See Conzelmann, *Theologie als Schriftauslegung*. In English the title of this book—a collection of previously published essays—is "Theology as Interpretation of Scripture."

6. Strecker, *Johannine Letters*, xiii.

7. Klein, *Rekonstruktion*, preface (my translation).

Rudolf Bultmann—Liberal Theologian

Instead of further documenting the above recollections, I shall turn to the great model among my New Testament teachers, Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), who dealt at great length with the issues at hand and whose historical and theological approach to scripture continues to be in considerable vogue.

Bultmann represents the best tradition of Enlightenment liberal scholarship on the New Testament. One need mention only his book *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, which even today presents a brilliant source-critical and form-critical analysis of the earliest Jesus traditions. And it is unnecessary to remind scholars today that Bultmann wrote this book as a student of the scholars of the history-of-religions school, including its fathers and grandfathers, such as Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) and David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874).

Bultmann also shared the ethos of liberal theology. He wrote:

We who have come out of liberal theology could not have remained theologians had we not been encountered by the seriousness of the radical integrity of liberal theology. We perceived the work of all shades of orthodox theology in the universities as an effort at compromise on which we could have been inwardly broken. Gustav Krüger is always to be thanked because he saw, in that oft-named essay on “unchurchly theology,” theology’s mission in the following: to endanger the souls, to lead into doubt, to shatter naive credulity. Here—so we perceived—was the atmosphere of truthfulness, in which alone we were able to breathe.⁸

Let me add to this a quotation from Gustav Krüger that is rooted in his overall assessment of New Testament studies:

The existence of a New Testament science (Wissenschaft) or a science of the New Testament as a special theological historical discipline is a major hindrance, first, to a fruitful investigation of earliest Christianity and indeed the New Testament itself, which leads to assured and generally recognized results, and second, to a healthy theological and academic education.⁹

Yet after adopting the dialectical theology of Karl Barth, Bultmann distanced himself sharply from the “theology” of his liberal teachers, including Gustav Krüger.

God as the Center of Theology¹⁰

In an article from 1924, “Liberal Theology and the Latest Theological Movement,” Bultmann accounts for his departure from liberal theology. He asserts that

8. Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen*, 2–3: The English translation is from Harvey, *Historian*, 7–8, which I have slightly edited. The article that Bultmann refers to in the quote is Krüger, “Die unkirchliche Theologie.”

9. Krüger, *Dogma*, 4 (my translation).

10. For the following, cf. Lüdemann, *Intolerance*, 13–14.

although the center of theology is God, liberal theology "has dealt not with God but with man."¹¹ He mentions two chief deficiencies of liberal theology:

1. Hoping to liberate the picture of Jesus from the burden of dogmatics and to gain an accurate historical picture of Jesus on which to base faith, liberal theologians have overlooked the fact that any historical result has only a relative validity. Indeed, according to Bultmann these scholars have misjudged the truth that "the world which faith wills to grasp is absolutely unattainable by means of scientific research,"¹² but is rooted in revelation.

2. The historical results of liberal theology "are only relative entities, *entities which exist only within an immense inter-related complex*. Nothing which stands within this inter-relationship can claim absolute value."¹³ Besides, "*Christianity is understood as a phenomenon of this world, subject to the laws of social psychology*. It is equally clear that such a conception runs exactly counter to the Christian view"¹⁴ that the word of God meets human beings unexpectedly.

Impartial versus Obedient Exegesis¹⁵

Bultmann's article from 1925, "The Problem of a Theological Exegesis of the New Testament," sheds light on another aspect of his protest against liberal theology. According to Bultmann, the decisive question in exegesis is whether to address the text "neutrally" so as to discover its historical content or whether, in pursuit of truth, we decide to let the subject matter contained in the text speak to us. The first option, the demand of impartial exegesis, Bultmann considers naive; the second he sees as the proper Christian attitude. For this latter viewpoint, he insists, reflects "recognition of the uncertainty of our existence . . . an attitude toward history which acknowledges it as authoritative and thus sees it not with the detachment of the spectator but in the light of present decision."¹⁶ In short, he argues that Christian exegesis disavows the validity of a neutral perspective.

Interpretation versus Reconstruction

Bultmann's work on the New Testament is guided by his fundamental interest in interpretation, a goal he clearly distinguishes from the reconstruction of past history:

Since the New Testament is a document of history, specifically of the history of religion, the interpretation of it requires the labor of historical investigation.

11. Bultmann, "Liberal Theology," 29.

12. Bultmann, "Liberal Theology," 31.

13. Bultmann, "Liberal Theology," 31.

14. Bultmann, "Liberal Theology," 32.

15. For the following, cf. Lüdemann, *Intolerance*, 14–15.

16. Bultmann, "Theological Exegesis," 249.

The method of this kind of inquiry has been worked out from the time of the Enlightenment onward and has been made fruitful for the investigation of primitive Christianity and the interpretation of the New Testament. Now such labor may be guided by either one of two interests, that of reconstruction or that of interpretation – that is, reconstruction of past history or interpretation of the New Testament writings. Neither exists, of course, without the other, and they stand constantly in a reciprocal relation to each other. But the question is: which of the two stands in the service of the other? Either the writings of the New Testament can be interrogated as the “sources” which the historian interprets in order to reconstruct a picture of primitive Christianity as a phenomenon of the historical past, or the reconstruction stands in the service of the interpretation of the New Testament writings under the presupposition that they have something to say to the present.¹⁷

In his work Bultmann decides to employ historical investigation in the service of New Testament interpretation. The most important topics are Paul, Judaism, and Gnosticism.

Paul

Together with several colleagues, Rudolf Bultmann argued from the viewpoint of dialectical theology that the proper object of Christian faith is the Christ of the proclamation, not the Jesus extracted from the text and reconstructed by historical scholars.¹⁸

Thus basing his argument in large part on the apostle Paul, for whom faith is the result of preaching,¹⁹ Bultmann understands Jesus’ death and resurrection as a “salvation occurrence.” Yet this is a one-sided use of Paul, since contrary to Paul, Bultmann presupposes the non-historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, and while criticizing Paul’s argument in 1 Cor 15:3–8, stresses that one cannot come to faith on the basis of the “fact” of the resurrection. Bultmann writes:

The resurrection cannot . . . be demonstrated or made plausible as an objectively ascertainable fact on the basis of which one could believe. But insofar as it or the risen Christ is present in the proclaiming word, it can be believed – and only so can it be believed. . . . The word which makes this proclamation is itself a part of the event; and this word, in contrast to all other historical tradition, accosts the hearer as personal challenge. If he heeds it as the word spoken to him, adjudicating to him death and thereby life, then he believes in the risen Christ.

Bultmann continues:

Any counter-questioning as to the proclamation’s right to its claim means that it is already rejected. Such questioning must be transformed into the question

17. Bultmann, *Theology*, 2.251.

18. Cf. the most recent renewal of Bultmann’s position in Strecker, *Theology*, 270–75. See Strecker’s comment, “Rudolf Bultmann coined the statement, ‘Jesus rose into the kerygma.’ This means that we can learn who Jesus really is not by historical investigation but from the Easter kerygma alone,” 275.

19. Cf. Rom 10:17a.

which the questioner has to ask himself—whether he is willing to acknowledge the Lord-ship of Christ which is putting this decision-question to his self-understanding.²⁰

Bultmann's reflections deserve support in several regards. *First*, full agreement must be accorded to his plain statement that, historically speaking, Jesus did not rise from the dead. *Second*, he correctly emphasizes that the statement "Christ rose" does not belong to the same category as any statement about the influence or impact of any other historical person, as for example, "George Washington rose." For in the latter case, it would be an historical judgment, whereas in Jesus' case, an eschatological event is asserted, something that transcends history. *Third*, it follows clearly that for Bultmann any questioning of this "event" is already a rejection of it.

The last two points invite intensive criticism, for they reflect the dogmatic basis of Bultmann's statement. For one thing, we may legitimately ask why he takes such pains to demythologize the message of the New Testament if in the end he is going to employ a strategy of immunization against criticism. The other question that arises is why Bultmann invites—or even promotes—misunderstanding by using the parallel construction "death and resurrection of Jesus" as if the two were parallel occurrences? The two expressions suggest a similarity that simply does not exist, and indeed in Bultmann's analysis the resurrection did not take place, but is only a faith-inspired interpretation of the cross. Having abandoned the traditional basis of Christian faith, can he claim to be a Christian theologian? According to Bultmann, modern Christians ought to participate in the faith that motivated the early Christians—the *kerygma* that embodied their interpretation—in spite of the fact that those first believers claimed a faith rooted in the risen Christ, a faith that included both fact and interpretation.

In an article from 1920, "Ethical and Mystical Religion in Primitive Christianity," Bultmann could still write (with a nod to his teachers in the history of religions stream)²¹ that Paul's conversion "is the ecstatic experience of a Hellenistic Jew, which drew him under the sway of the Kyrios-cult of the Hellenistic congregation."²² But in later days, having shifted his allegiance to dialectical theology, Bultmann relegated to the background all neutral or objective statements about Paul's conversion. From this point on Bultmann was extracting new, spiritual content from Paul's conversion, with an implied message for the interpreter at the same time. He writes: "For just this is what his conversion meant: In it he surrendered his previous understanding of himself;

20. Bultmann, *Theology*, 1.305–6.

21. I am thinking especially of Wilhelm Heitmüller, Johannes Weiss, and Wilhelm Bousset. Cf. Lüdemann and Schröder, *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*.

22. Bultmann, "Ethical and Mystical Religion," 224–25.

[. . .] it was obedient submission to the judgment of God, made known in the cross of Christ, upon all human accomplishment and boasting. It is as such that his conversion is reflected in his theology."²³

We must ask, however, whether a theological interpretation of Paul's conversion does not constitute an impediment to historical reconstruction and any concomitant understanding of the apostle. That is, the strictly historical questions—regarding Paul's origin, his conversion-experience (whether it was a vision paralleled by later sightings), and the relation between the insight gained at this time and later statements in his letters—are not indifferent matters when it comes to the meaning of the conversion. Bultmann's statements, which give the impression that the entire later Pauline theology is contained in the conversion, must surely be subjected to scrutiny.

Judaism

Similar objections must be raised to his treatment of Judaism. These concern the question of whether in his theological exegesis Bultmann factually distorts the historical objects he is examining. Note that despite his turn to theological interpretation, the historical reconstruction that Bultmann claims continued to play an important role in theological exegesis and was supposedly based on the critical consensus of scholarship.

Let me use Bultmann's book *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting* as a test case. At the beginning Bultmann assures the reader that he does "not seek to prove that Christianity is true, nor even that it is the climax of the religious evolution of antiquity."²⁴ Besides, he does not "intend to explain the reasons why Christianity finally triumphed over its competitors, thus assuming its superiority over them."²⁵ That is not what Bultmann as historian has in mind. Indeed, such motives are alien to him. The reasons are simple:

The truth of Christianity, like that of any other religion or philosophy, is always a matter of personal decision, and the historian has no right to deprive any man of that responsibility. Nor, as is often asserted, is it his business to end up by assessing the value of what he has been describing. He can certainly clarify the issues involved in the decision. For it is his task to interpret the movements of history as possible ways of understanding human existence, thus demonstrating their relevance today. By bringing the past to life again, he should drive home the fact that here *tua res agitur*: this is your business.²⁶

The aim then of Bultmann's book on *Primitive Christianity* is this:

It is not an original piece of historical research. It does not claim to offer any new material for the study of comparative religion or fresh combinations of

23. Bultmann, *Theology*, 1.188.

24. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 11.

25. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 11.

26. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 11–12.

facts already known. It takes such research for granted. Its purpose is rather that of interpretation. We shall ask what understanding of human existence is enshrined in primitive Christianity, what new philosophy of life. Or, to put it more cautiously, is there such an understanding, and if so, how far does it go?²⁷

Yet, despite Bultmann's stated intention to abstain from value judgments, his description of Judaism amounts to a caricature written from a Christian perspective, not an historical one. The very hermeneutics of *tua res agitur* seem to lead Bultmann to false historical judgments.

In the aforementioned book *Primitive Christianity*, Bultmann in the section on "Judaism I. Synagogue and Law" underscores the "strong sense of history and election"²⁸ among the Jews of the second temple. Yet, as he asserts, the idea of election contains a "curious inner contradiction" that provides the clue in order to explain the phenomenon of Israel. "Loyalty to the past became loyalty to a book which was all about the past. God was no longer really the God of history. . . . He was no longer a vital factor in the present."²⁹ Bultmann continues: "History was likewise brought to a standstill. . . . The redemption [Israel] hoped for in the future was not a real historical event, but a fantastic affair in which all history had been brought to an end for good and all."³⁰ Thus

life was alienated from history, which is the natural sphere to which it belongs. The Law inculcated not only morality, but ritualism. Ritual became the more important of the two, with the result that men lost sight of their social and cultural responsibilities. The 'chosen people' were not called to fulfil a special mission in history, but to be the 'holy nation', above all worldly interests and ideals" (62). Bultmann hastens to add that "sanctity was an entirely negative affair, since most of the regulations are negative and prohibitive in character. . . . To take them seriously meant making life an intolerable burden. (66)

Consequently Bultmann describes Jewish piety as based on formal obedience;³¹ he attributes to Jesus' contemporaries an uncertainty about salvation³² and claims that Judaism thinks of God's relationship to his people only in legalistic terms. Indeed, Bultmann opines,

Jesus must have had good reasons for saying what he did about straining at the gnat and swallowing the camel (Matt. 23.24). The ritual commandments having lost their original meaning, man's relation to God was inevitably conceived in legalistic terms.³³

27. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 12.

28. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 60.

29. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 60.

30. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 60–61.

31. See Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 68: "Radical obedience would have involved a personal assent to the divine command, whereas in Judaism so many of the precepts were trivial or unintelligible that the kind of obedience produced was formal rather than radical."

32. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 70: "A further consequence of the legalistic conception of obedience was that the prospect of salvation became highly uncertain."

33. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 67–68.

These and other statements derive from a Christian dogmatic perspective, however, which, purposely if unconsciously blind to its own existence, has the sole aim of glorifying the doctrine of Christian salvation against the dark foil of Judaism.³⁴

In other discourses on Judaism, Bultmann emphasizes that the negative remarks of the apostle Paul have a theological aim. For example, when Paul assails the Jews because, "being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. Christ is the end of the law"³⁵—or when he declaims that "the law brings wrath"³⁶—he is not making factual or empirical judgments but theological statements based on faith. Indeed, "Paul regards *man's existence* prior to *faith* in the transparency it has gained to the eye of faith"³⁷—that is, Paul looks back to human existence prior to faith through the new eyes he has gained by accepting the gospel.

As the foregoing examples demonstrate, Bultmann obviously regarded Paul's theological approach as theologically normative. This does not, however, persuade me to accept assertions that historical research has been once and for all refuted.

I therefore remain skeptical of approaches that rely on hermeneutics to rescue the historical validity of Paul's statements about the law. This dissent includes the stand of such contemporary exegetes as the Zurich New Testament professor Hans Weder, a theological disciple of Bultmann, who takes a view similar to that of his teacher.

In an article titled "Law and Sin: Reflections on a Qualitative Leap in Paul's Thought," Weder writes: "The question of whether the historical Paul has accurately construed historical Judaism and its understanding of the law is of secondary importance. . . . Arguments based on the law—whether Jewish or Christian law—necessarily lead us to conclude that Paul has misunderstood the law."³⁸ The reason is that "Paul's criticism of the law reveals a situation that cannot on the basis of the law—Jewish or Christian—be made plausible."³⁹

The situation alluded to is the leap of faith, carelessly referred to as revelation, by which Paul—and Weder, and indeed Bultmann—come to see the death of Jesus as a source of atoning grace that frees humans from the petty strictures of an outmoded legal code. The trouble is, of course, that a priori claims like grace and divinely arranged salvation belong to a realm of discourse quite apart from legal codes and logical demonstration. However grand it may seem to

34. See Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 42–48.

35. Rom 10:3–4.

36. Rom 4:15a.

37. Bultmann, *Theology*, 1.270.

38. Weder, "Gesetz und Sünde," 369–70 (my translation).

39. Weder, "Gesetz und Sünde," 359 (my translation).

trump mere rational plausibility by playing the revelation card, such a maneuver cannot pass muster in the forum of scholarly demonstration.

Gnosticism

For the New Testament scholar, the term "Gnosticism" derives largely from the work of Rudolf Bultmann and his pupils. Building on the results of the history-of-religions school,⁴⁰ Bultmann interpreted the early Christian proclamation against the background of Gnosticism,⁴¹ which he regarded as

a religious movement of pre-Christian origin, invading the West from the Orient as a competitor of Christianity. Since it appropriated all sorts of mythological and philosophical traditions for its expression, we may call it a syncretistic phenomenon. . . . a redemptive religion based on dualism. This is what gives it an affinity to Christianity, an affinity of which even its adherents were aware. Consequently, Gnosticism and Christianity have affected each other in a number of different directions from the earliest days of the Christian movement.⁴²

Bultmann described the related *Gnostic myth* as follows. It

depicts the cosmic drama by which the imprisonment of the sparks of light came about, a drama whose end is already beginning now and will be complete when they are released. The drama's beginning, the tragic event of primeval time, is variously told in several variants of the myth. . . . The demonic powers get into their clutches a person who originates in the light-world either because he is led astray by his own foolishness or because he is overcome in battle. . . . *Redemption* comes from the heavenly world. Once more a light-person sent by the highest god, indeed the son and the "image" of the most high, comes down from the light-world bringing *Gnosis*. He "wakes" the sparks of light who have sunk into sleep or drunkenness and "reminds" them of their heavenly home.⁴³

It is in this sense that I will use the term "Gnosticism." It is the designation of a specific myth and supposedly provides us with the name of a movement that was a rival of the early Christian groups.

In his *Theology of the New Testament* mentioned above, under the heading "Gnostic Motifs," Rudolf Bultmann develops "connectedly the extent to which the understanding of the Christian message in Hellenistic Christianity was unfolded by means of Gnostic terminology."⁴⁴ The reason for such an approach is evident: "For Christian missions, the *Gnostic movement* was a competitor of the most serious and dangerous sort because of the far-reaching relatedness between them."⁴⁵ Where did Gnosticism originate? Bultmann is certain that "the

40. Cf. Lüdemann, "The Relationship of Biblical Studies to the History of Religions School."

41. Bultmann, *Theology*, Vols.1-2, passim.

42. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 162 (my italics).

43. Bultmann, *Theology*, 1.166-67.

44. Bultmann, *Theology*, 1.164.

45. Bultmann, *Theology*, 1.165.

Gnostic movement did take a concrete form in various baptizing sects in the region of the Jordan; these also drew certain Jewish groups into their orbit."⁴⁶ As far as the transmission of Gnostic ideas is concerned, Bultmann remarks: "Naturally Gnosticism, just like Christianity, is also spread by wandering teachers."⁴⁷

Bultmann's pupil Walter Schmithals took great pains to analyze the penetration of Gnostic teachers into the Pauline churches, and thereby put historical flesh on the bones of his teacher's general hypothesis of Gnosticism as a rival movement of early Christianity.⁴⁸ Against Ferdinand Christian Baur's thesis of a Jewish Christian anti-Pauline mission,⁴⁹ Schmithals denies any significant influence of Jewish Christianity in the Pauline communities, and actually replaces Jewish Christianity by Gnosticism. Supposedly, Paul himself constantly attacked these Gnostic rival missionaries and at the same time quite ironically had a good deal in common with them. According to Schmithals, the Christ-party in Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 1:12), which for Baur was the focal point of Jewish Christian opposition to Paul, constituted the center of Gnosticism in Corinth. Its characteristics, to mention the most important ones, were an ascetic detachment from the world (1 Cor 7:1), a spiritualized eschatology (cf. 1 Cor 15:12), and a docetic christology (cf. 1 Cor 2:8; 12:3).

In general, Schmithals' bold reconstructions have found little assent in scholarship. In order to be able to defend a unified Gnostic opposition to Paul, Schmithals has to argue against the view that 1 Thessalonians (or its parts) is the oldest extant letter of Paul. Instead he places it after 1 Corinthians during the so-called third missionary journey (= Acts 18:23–21:15).⁵⁰ But the traditional view on the early place of 1 Thessalonians in Paul's career has solid support, as it is based on the apostle's remarks in the letter itself. In 1:5 and 2:1 (cf. 3:1) Paul refers to the initial preaching in Thessalonica, which cannot have taken place long before, and the combination of this with Acts 17 leads to the generally accepted view that 1 Thessalonians was written during the so-called second missionary journey (Acts 15:36–18:22).⁵¹

Let me hasten to add that not a single text in 1 Thessalonians itself gives rise to the suspicion that there were Gnostics in Thessalonica. At no point is there even a trace of disappointment over the relationship between the congregation and the apostle. How could Paul have said that he had no need to write to them regarding brotherly love (1 Thess 4:9) if incidents similar to those in Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 5:1–5; 2 Cor 1:23; 13:2) had occurred in their congregation?

46. Bultmann, *Theology*, 1.167.

47. Bultmann, *Theology*, 1.171.

48. Walter Schmithals' two relevant books are *Gnosticism in Corinth* and *Paul and the Gnostics*.

49. On Baur, see Lüdemann, *Opposition to Paul*, 1–9.

50. See the discussion in Lüdemann, *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles*, 206–9.

51. I leave aside the question of the absolute date of 1 Thessalonians, because only the chronological sequence of Paul's letters matters here.

I argue thus despite Wolfgang Harnisch's attempt to establish the view that the same Gnostic group is involved in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4,⁵² for Harnisch fails to account for the different responses to the allegedly identical situation. In 1 Corinthians Paul strongly emphasizes the future resurrection of Christians: if one denies this resurrection, then Christ has not been raised (1 Cor 15:16). Yet in 1 Thess 4:13–18 we find the argument that Christians who have died suffer no disadvantage when compared with the living, for the dead too will be caught up to participate in everlasting fellowship with Christ. This means, however, that in contrast to 1 Corinthians 15, 1 Thess 4:13–18 does not make the resurrection of Christians a major point of discussion. It is adduced only as an auxiliary thought, to ensure the future union of the minority of deceased Christians. For this reason, Harnisch's assumption that the resurrection of the Christians had become a controversial point in Thessalonica is open to serious question. Hence a Gnostic point of view as the target of Paul's statements remains unlikely.

To formulate a preliminary conclusion: the thesis of a Gnostic movement that systematically invaded the Pauline communities finds little or no support in the earliest extant letter of Paul, 1 Thessalonians. Studies of the other Pauline communities (Corinth, Philippi, Galatia) do not yield any different result.⁵³ Scholarship must in all likelihood abandon the hypothesis that a cohesive Gnostic movement is reflected in Paul's letters. "The plain truth is that you could not have found anyone in Corinth to direct you to a Gnostic church: the overwhelming probability is that there was no such thing."⁵⁴

In summary, Bultmann's presentation of Gnosticism as a movement parallel to Christianity is perhaps one of the worst historical misjudgments of New Testament scholarship in the past century and clearly the most influential. It is a Christian interpretation interested only in hermeneutical results, the *tua res agitur*, although it does not reveal itself as such. Bultmann presents Gnosticism only in order to prove it inferior to Christianity.⁵⁵

For instance, Bultmann asserted that Christianity and Gnosticism shared the same view about the *conditio humana* in the world; according to them an occurrence from outside oneself would bring salvation.⁵⁶ "They differed, however, in what each conceived to be the root cause of the problem. For Gnosticism, it was fate; for Christianity, sin."⁵⁷ They also had dissimilar concepts of salvation, and here Bultmann saw Gnosticism to be especially faulty, since Gnosticism—for Bultmann—erroneously proposed a naturalistic model of salvation that alleg-

52. Thus Harnisch, *Eschatologische Existenz*, passim.

53. See Lüdemann, *Opposition to Paul*, 64–115.

54. Nock, *Essays*, 2.957.

55. For what follows, cf. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 100–107. I have benefited from her overall exposition of "Gnosticism."

56. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 191.

57. King, *Gnosticism*, 105. Cf. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 191–92.

edly emptied our life as individuals.⁵⁸ For Bultmann the Christian preaching of the cross will always open the way to a new and nobler life of love that springs from faith. Gnosticism, on the other hand, supposedly devalued and ultimately denied life's meaning. Thus it was to be judged insufficient on account of its world-denying moral code.⁵⁹

Bultmann considered his inferences as "canonical" for theology and church.⁶⁰ Yet the unconcealed deployment of theological norms is rather doubtful, especially since it justifies a suppression of historical facts in the name of the *tua res agitur* principle of "higher history."

The Intolerance of the *Kerygma* and the Two Notions of History⁶¹

Bultmann's statements about the relationship between reconstruction and interpretation are based on his conviction that the biblical text is both a call for decision and ultimately a valid historical record. For that reason he does not pay enough attention to the history that a properly critical theology should try to reconstruct. In those cases where interpretation and reconstruction conflict, Bultmann, too, often turns to a reconstruction that is amenable to a theologically determined interpretation. Indeed, he employs two different notions of history: factual history and meaningful history of the *tua res agitur* type.⁶² He writes: "But the decisive question is whether we confront history in such a way that we acknowledge its claim upon us, its claim to say something new to us. When we give up a neutral attitude toward the text, the question of truth can dominate the exegesis."⁶³

Thus Bultmann thinks it hopeless "to justify theology as science before the forum of an unbelieving culture."⁶⁴ Indeed, he judges any attempt in that direction as a "self-surrender of theology,"⁶⁵ for the "object of theology is visible only to faith, and this faith itself belongs to its object—in fact, it *is* its object in the sense that in faith itself God's act, the eschatological occurrence, takes place in itself."⁶⁶ In other words, theology becomes an intellectual rationalization of a religious certitude of faith. As such it can be an academic discipline only on the condition that a specific revelation in the form of the kerygma constitutes the decisive event of grace. Such a claim, however, is clearly unscientific. For one thing, its basis is an irrational call for faith; for another, it subordinates factual

58. Cf. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 193.

59. Cf. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 105–6.

60. Cf. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 106–7.

61. For the following, cf. Lüdemann, *Intolerance*, 17–19.

62. See on this aspect of Bultmann's thought, Funk, *Language*.

63. Bultmann, "Theological Exegesis," 239.

64. Bultmann, "Theology as a Science," 66.

65. Bultmann, "Theology as a Science," 66.

66. Bultmann, "Theology as a Science," 66.

history to existential or meaningful history. According to Bultmann, then, theology properly understood “cannot dispense with the categories of right teaching and heresy,”⁶⁷ for a dogmatism of the old style remains its basis.

It is therefore not surprising that Bultmann the exegete not only finds the gospel intolerant, but also considers his real theological task to attest to the intolerance of the revelation. In connection with his exegesis of the good shepherd speech in the Gospel of John,⁶⁸ he writes:

There are not various possible answers to man’s quest for salvation, but only one. A decision must be made. This is the basis of the intolerance of the revelation.

Tolerance, i.e. the recognition of every honest intention as of equal right, is demanded in that sphere of man’s activity where the goal is left to man’s intention and ability. . . . Thus outside the revelation man is always a seeker, so that it is pointless for man to pass judgment on others; what is required is tolerance. . . .

Yet man’s search ends when he is confronted with the revelation which opens up to every man the true understanding of himself. Here absolute recognition is demanded. Here there can be no tolerance. But of course it is the revelation which is intolerant; men can only be tolerant of each other. . . .

Yet the believer does not commit himself to the revelation in order to champion its cause, but only in order to listen to it, to recognise its victory. His intolerance is not a denial of the sincerity and seriousness of the non-believer’s commitment. . . .

His intolerance consists in refusing to make concessions in gaining a hearing for the revelation, for the claim of that power which has made all human commitment obsolete and illusory. It consists in upholding the “truth” that all human commitment and endeavour, through which man seeks to find his true being, is bound to fail; that the revelation demands that man abandon his attempt to find himself by giving himself up to this or that cause, because God in his revelation has already given up himself for men; that Jesus has come to give life and fulness.⁶⁹

Yet Bultmann obviously plays Old Harry with history. From the texts of the New Testament, he filters the absolute claim of truth—the intolerance of the gospel in the form of the *kerygma*—and keeps the demand of intolerance. But this seems to involve a contradiction, for the truth claim was part of a worldview that included imminent expectation of the end-time—a notion that came to grief because Christians kept dying and Jesus did not return. This is to say nothing of the gospel proclamation’s absolute reliance on the ancient view of a three-tiered universe—another myth that collapsed a long while ago.⁷⁰

67. Bultmann, “Theology as a Science,” 65.

68. Bultmann, *Gospel of John*. My quote is taken from the section “*The exclusiveness and the absoluteness of the Revelation: 10.7–10,*” 375–80. The first German edition of this most influential commentary appeared in 1941.

69. Bultmann, *Gospel of John*, 378–80.

70. For the following, c.f., Lüdemann, *Im Würgegriff der Kirche*, 34.

Although fully aware of the failure of the imminent expectation, Bultmann sought to validate the truth claims of the essential biblical texts. Yet it is completely unjustified to ascribe to those texts absolute authority over the truth claims of other religions. Indeed, absolute truth claims are part of most religions. Whether we look at Jesus, his disciples, Paul, Muhammad, Joseph Smith, or more recent prophets, we see that each has laid claim to absolute truth derived from revelation and on that basis demanded total obedience. In short, history itself has put into question any and all claims to absolute truth.

One gets nowhere by arguing that only through obedience can one understand the truth claim of the Christian revelation. That is precisely the game that other religions play, and the truth claim of any religion is vitiated by the conflicting truth claims of the many religions. Besides, as a free human being I must reject the arbitrary and presumptuous proposal that I am obliged to assent to a religion's truth claims before I can understand them.

It is at best incongruous that Bultmann the great demythologizer should have joined the dogmatists. Yet it is clear that in his system the ancient dogma of inspiration remains implicitly valid. For according to his formulations, something is held to be true not because it is true but because it is part of the kerygma, the preaching of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ that demands obedience from its hearers.

Worse yet, it is ingenuous—and strangely so in such a learned and profound thinker as Bultmann—to suppose that having shattered one mythological system, the best way to fill the resulting void is to create another myth with an equal or greater degree of inscrutability. The world of today and tomorrow seems to cry out for fewer metaphysical doctrines and a greater emphasis on Jesus' call for a this-worldly concern for our neighbor's well being.

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