

I

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CRITICAL HISTORICAL METHOD FOR CHURCH AND THEOLOGY IN PROTESTANTISM*¹

I

PROTESTANT theology has for the last thirty years been marked by a passionate renunciation of Neo-Protestantism, i.e. of the development that took place in the churches of the Reformation from about the middle of the seventeenth century under the influence of the modern spirit. The aversion applies equally to the entire changing pattern of theological thinking and its results in the Church in the period of the Enlightenment, of Idealism, of Romanticism and of Liberalism. Indeed, it includes also the whole of Pietism, as a phenomenon sprung from the same roots, and even turns likewise against early Protestant Orthodoxy in so far as it is held to have already paved the way for the false developments of later days. Instead of this a radical return to the theology of the Reformers is sought.

In regard to this basic tendency in contemporary Protestant theology the question arises whether, or in what sense, such a renunciation of the theological work of the last two or three centuries and a radical return

* *ZTK* 47 (1950), pp. 1-46.

¹ The essay is based on a paper which in October 1949 introduced a discussion on the proposed joint undertaking among the members of the editorial circle [of the *ZTK*]. To the ensuing debate I owe various suggestions which have been taken into account in revising the paper. Yet it has retained the character of a purely private work of the author, and, in spite of the far-reaching agreement that has been achieved in principle, it must not by any means be regarded as expressing the common policy of all the associates responsible for the Journal. The range and difficulty of the questions raised forbid any attempt to see in the remarks that follow more than a provisional contribution for discussion. I have resolved to publish it only in the hope of thereby stimulating a debate which may lead us to greater clarity, and in which also many subsidiary problems that are here of necessity only fleetingly touched on can be expounded separately and in detail.

to the theology of the Reformers is possible at all. Without discussing this question in detail, general historical considerations make it possible to say one thing right away: a mere refurbishing and repetition of the theology of the Reformers is as utterly impossible as the by-passing of the intervening history with its alterations in the statement of the problems and its new presentations of them. Even a theology which is ever so closely oriented towards the theology of the Reformers will be compelled to **differ** from it considerably, as surely as disregard of the historical **difference** between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries turns out in the end to be nothing but a piece of self-deception. If the change that has taken place between the age of the Reformation and ourselves may be provisionally characterized by saying that the rise of the critical historical method is one at least of the decisive features of so-called Neo-protestantism, then the question boils down to this: what is the relationship between the return to the theology of the Reformers which is now demanded and **practised** and the critical historical method which has meantime attained increasing, and in the second half of the nineteenth century **wellnigh** undisputed, dominance in theology?

It is true that in contemporary theological literature there are occasionally statements to be found which advocate the fundamental rejection of the critical historical method.

That is surely nowhere done more bluntly than by the teacher of philosophy at the Kirchliche Hochschule Berlin, Dr Erwin Reisner, in his essay on *Offenbarungsglaube und historische Wissenschaft* (published in the Kirchliche Hochschule Berlin's series *Der Anfang*, vol. 3, 1947). In it he says: 'To recognize and accept revelation means quite simply, to capitulate to it unconditionally, to surrender everything that belongs to the nature of the godless world and its godless history and makes it a perverse world and perverse history. The man who has once grasped what it means to be a sinner has no option but to let go of the whole superstition that calls itself science, above all historical science' (p. 14). Commenting on a sentence from Berdyaev, Reisner asserts 'that the "Christian philosophy of history", i.e. simply revelation's understanding of history, unmask[s] not only the failure of history but also that of secular scientific historical research' (p. 17). And he goes on: 'Till now—at least in the last two centuries—the truth of revelation has been subordinated to the judgment of historical science. It was considered right, often in fact even obligatory, to subject the sacred traditions to rational criticism and measure them by the standards which the autonomous mind had set up for its own purposes. Even theology itself, especially the theology of the more recent Protestant schools, has displayed and for the most part still displays this questionable scientific ambition. One could often **almost** say: it finds

vindication at the bar of science more important than vindication before God. That is called human autonomy. This fruit of the enjoyment of the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge arrogates to itself the right and the power to decide on the truth or falsehood of the Word of God. The rational science that rests on the foundation of the pre-scientific decision to be "as God" seeks-and this is an extremely clever trick of the devil's-to abrogate the very revelation by means of which that pre-scientific decision has to be unmasked in the first place and then disputed. There is a whole list of very telling, and in fact seemingly thoroughly obvious, arguments in favour of this procedure. It is alleged, for example, that scientific criticism is justified because the Word of God has assumed the form of a servant-that is to say, because it has humbled itself and presented itself in a guise which bears all the marks of human, all-too-human weakness and is for that very reason also subject to human criticism. Thus critical historical science (it is said) has not the slightest wish to impugn the Word of God itself, but is concerned only with a thorough examination of the human word in which it is clothed. With that the impious treatment of scripture goes the length of assuming the mask of peculiar piety. The alleged intention is to analyse the servant-form in order to bring to light the glorious form behind it. But is that itself not a dreadful piece of presumption? If God reveals himself to man under the veil of the servant-form, then he thereby brings man under judgment, because owing to his unfitness for God he could not bear the glorious form. Thus the servant-form of God in his revelation shows me my own true form: ecce *homo*! I am here subjected to the criticism of God. How should it be possible now to turn the tables by making myself the judge and critic of the Word that here confronts me, for all its servant-form? This servant-form does not in fact confer any rights on me at all: quite the contrary, it takes clean out of my hands every right to make any autonomous judgment. The real call of today -and this can never be impressed urgently enough upon theology and theologians-is to make a turn of 180 degrees and bring historical science, especially in so far as it has gained a dominant position within theology itself, under the judgment of revelation and mark it plainly as an erroneous path leading to falsehood. It is not at all a case of "demythologizing" the New Testament, or any other part of the scriptures: it is a case of "**de-historizing**" theology' (pp. 17 ff).

Reisner's effort to uphold the authoritative character of the word of scripture (identified with revelation) over against the despotism of historical criticism coincides with the concern shown by the Greifswald teacher Dr Helmut Echternach in a study on the limits of theology and the authority of the Word under the title *Es stehet geschrieben* (appearing as volume 14 of the Furche Studies edited by Hanns Lilje, Berlin 1937). He sets in the forefront of his study the thesis: "The biblical text that is binding for church and theology and therefore verbally immune from error is for us the German translation of Martin Luther in the form prescribed to the church as text and

canon' (p. 9). Any reader who thinks at first that he has not rightly understood, or that the author is only using a paradoxical statement to induce him to read further, will learn to think again when he meets another no less astonishing thesis: 'An exegesis which does not agree with the confessional statements of the Lutheran Evangelical Church, is from the start also false' (p. 80). That Echtermach really means the tomfoolery of his opening thesis seriously, is perfectly clear from his reflexions on the problem of textual revision of the Luther Bible: 'Whoever ventures the outrageous attempt at textual revision puts himself. .. *extra ecclesiam*' (p. 72). True, Echtermach himself raises the objection that the Luther text used in the church today is itself the product of a revision. To that too, however, he finds an answer worthy of his basic thesis. Return to the original Luther text would of course also be textual revision. But the fact is: 'The text that now happens to be valid must remain' (p. 73). 'The fact that in the Evangelical Church of Germany a revision could come about at all-and the **1911** one at that! - was not only the ever-new result of Genesis 11. Over and above that, it was the issue of a special divine wrath that hung over this church. We have to bear the **1911** Bible as a punishment' (p. 73). If one takes the trouble, in spite of these samples, to examine the elaborations of such an ingeniously tricked-out theology of catastrophe in search of their point, then what comes to light is again the attempt to safeguard the real objectivity of the Word of God in its absurdity and contradictoriness against the 'boring-through tendency' (as Echtermach calls it) of modern critical exegesis, which seeks the content of revelation somehow or other behind the text and so becomes its master, instead of letting it stand over against us as the hard, indissoluble, offence-giving thing it is and so 'experiencing the pounding and shattering of theology upon the rocks of truth' (p. 10). When Echtermach describes pressing back to the original text as already a stirring of the 'boring-through tendency' (p. 72) and talks of boring through to inanity as a necessary result of the development of the concept of scripture in the last 200 years (p. 32), when he considers the search for the original meaning of the text to be an illusion and defines the task of exegesis as merely ascertaining what the text has to say to us today (p. 75), so as thereby to rule out in principle all questions of analysis (p. 76), then we are certainly surprised to hear again in the end that 'naturally' that is not by any means to say the work of philological historical science is meaningless. The examples, however, which he then provides of the process of opening up the depths of the Luther text by comparing it with the different meaning of the original text as ascertained by critical historical means, prove to be cheap pieces of *dextrous* harmonizing. Theology, of which Echtermach says that in every age it is the shock-troops of antichrist (p. 40), here changes again after all into a massive bulwark of ecclesiastical positivism and traditionalism. If Echtermach complains that Karl Barth's correct starting-point in the concept of revelation is thwarted by the philologically analysed concept of scripture, which is

nowhere expressed with such fundamental sharpness as in Barth (p. 34), he nevertheless praises Barth on the other hand for the fact that in his case the thwarting takes place only theoretically in the concept of scripture, but not however in his exegesis (p. 36)—so that Echernach in spite of his preceding criticism can describe Barth as the only contemporary theologian whose theology is **free** of any element of construction (p. 67).

As a **final** example of disregard of the critical historical method, particularly noteworthy because of the eminence of its author, we would cite a statement to be found in Hans Asmussen's preparatory study for the World Council of Churches conference in Amsterdam with the title *Gesetz und Evangelium* (appearing in the academic series *Lebendige Wissenschaft* edited by Professor von Campenhausen, vol. 3, Stuttgart 1947). Asmussen wishes to take Isaiah 40-66 as an illustration of the free and unconditional proclamation of grace, i.e. of our venturing to testify to deliverance before the necessity for a deliverance arises on our horizon at all. **Already** in 1944, he says, at a Bible-study retreat for **Württemberg** ministers, he had 'laid great stress on the preacher's having clear ideas regarding the authorship of these chapters' (p. 32). What Asmussen understands by these 'clear ideas' is disclosed in the following sentences: 'For about 150 years it has been taken for one of the most elementary marks of theological education to ascribe the section Isaiah 40-66 to a **different** author from the author of the first 39 chapters. The common conviction is, that these 26 chapters [I count 27 chapters!] did not arise until after the event they presuppose. It is thought that the prophet did not proclaim the message "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people" until after the release from Babylonian captivity had become a thing of the past. I have never considered this hypothesis correct. It has ultimately no scientific grounds, but is dogmatically conditioned throughout. It rests chiefly on observation of the fact that the name Cyrus appears in these 26 chapters. It is considered self-evident that either God did not yet know that the liberator of his people would be called Cyrus, or else that God was not in a position, or was not of a mind, to reveal this name to his prophet. For that reason, in the preparation for the Bible Study in the autumn of 1944, I earnestly prayed for the **renunciation** of this pet theory. This is not merely a literary question. It is rather one where a central part of our proclamation is at stake. If we take the 26 chapters of the prophet Isaiah quite simply as having been spoken 150 years before the events they refer to, then and not till then do we appreciate the weight of the glad tidings they bring' (pp. 32 f). This primitive dogmatical way of arguing, which incidentally does not even reveal precise acquaintance with the *communis opinio* of Old Testament research which it attacks, does not only in this one case evade the **labour** of good clean exegesis, but tacitly includes a fundamental rejection of the critical historical method.

Examples of such radical disregard of the principles of historical

method in the more recent Protestant theological literature could, it is true, be multiplied-especially from the field of Old Testament exegesis -yet they really form exceptions in the picture as a whole. We might ask whether troubling ourselves with them is not **already** doing them too much honour-or rather, whether pointing them out in public is not sufficient to make them impossible on their own showing. Of course, the fact that the publications cited are not obscure cases but that each of them, both through the name of the author and through the place of publication is intimately associated with the official Evangelical Church, must be a warning against taking their appearance all too lightly. We must ask ourselves if we are not here face to face with certain symptoms of a much more deep-seated sore in theology and the church, i.e. if it is not the case that here a widespread theological current, whose consequences are commonly veiled, suddenly emerges with all the clarity one could wish.

For that reason we must first of all very much widen the scope of our observations and reflexions, and seek to grasp a few characteristic features of the theological and ecclesiastical situation in which we find ourselves. For the question of the critical historical method is far from being a formal, technical problem of methodology: it is a question which, from the historical and the factual point of view, touches on the deepest foundations and the most difficult interconnexions of theological thinking and of the church situation.

To interpret one's own age by setting it in its wider historical context is, owing to the all too short distance from the object, always a very risky and easily contested undertaking, to which the historian in particular has an understandable aversion. Yet to refrain entirely from doing so would-apart from our being really quite unable to help making ourselves some sort of picture of the history of our own times-be all the more noxious for the fact that reflexion of this kind, however defective it may be, constitutes a necessary element in responsible examination of our own position and action in the present. This sort of contemplation of the history of the times can on occasion become a not immaterial kind of direct participation in the events of the times.

There is likely to be general agreement that the end of the First World War forms a milestone also in the history of the church and of theology. However much the general political and intellectual upheaval may have contributed to that, and however little fundamental changes took place at first in strictly ecclesiastical circles, there is still no mistaking the fact that since the beginning of the twenties a new power has arisen in the

Protestant world which has remarkable driving-force and moves in a direction of its own.

It is characteristic of the nature of Protestantism that this new factor has proceeded from theology and has remained confined, in the first instance at least, to the work of the theologians. Authors and works so far apart to our way of thinking today as Rudolf Otto with his book on the Holy, Karl Barth with his Romans, Karl Holl with his collection of Luther Essays, Wilhelm **Lütgert** with his work on the Religion of German Idealism and its End, Emil Brunner with his Schleiermacher book *Die Mystik und das Wort*, Friedrich Gogarten with his controversy with cultural idealism in *Illusionen*, Rudolf Bultmann with his book on Jesus—they all form, in that more or less accidental chronological order, a chain of effective impulses towards a thoroughgoing new orientation of theological thinking. The right to join their names together like that at all certainly rests above all merely on the fact that at roughly the same time and in relative independence of each other they threw theology into a ferment. And yet surely more than that can be said of their mutual **affinity**, be it ever so limited. Even the one still most strongly indebted to the nineteenth century in his method and his way of thinking, Rudolf Otto, certainly also had his share in contributing from the **religious-historical** standpoint towards the unsettling of a popular theological liberalism, and in his own way likewise towards the pointing up of elements grown unfamiliar in the Reformers' **faith**. For the consciousness of being unable simply to continue on the nineteenth century's line of theological development, and of being called to subject church and theology to a thoroughgoing critical revision that takes its bearings from the Reformation, is the basic tendency that has established itself since the end of the First World War with surprising speed and power of appeal. The fact that the theological and ecclesiastical party formations of left and right inherited from the nineteenth century have been broken through and are felt over a wide front to have been left behind, is the clearest sign of the change that has come over the situation. From now on one can hardly **find** another notable theological work that is not touched somehow or other by this change of situation. And yet it is very **difficult** to give more precise substance to the common factor which comes to expression here. Even the 'dialectic theology' group, which to begin with rose up as a unity from among the multiplicity of forces participating in the upheaval, broke apart after only a short decade to become apparently irreconcilable opponents, although at first a **specific** common impulse had unquestionably been present and had proved

itself the most effective in comparison with the motive forces at work alongside it. The premature split in the circle, which had its voice in the journal *Zwischen den Zeiten*, must not be interpreted as a sign of weakness, but rather as a result of the swift successes which accelerated the internal development, but therewith also the differentiation and complication of the problems. Yet no sharply definable groupings have resulted from this process. Only the immediate entourage of Karl Barth—**though** his actual influence extends far beyond it and indisputably sounds the dominant note in the present theological situation—forms a more or less **firmly** outlined unity. This state of affairs must not, however, prevent us from seeing that even the most violently conflicting standpoints of today possess a wide measure of agreement in their reaction against the nineteenth century. And this assertion again, though now almost a commonplace of theology, must not create any illusions about the fact that the relation of contemporary theology to that of the nineteenth century is really not after all simply one of radical breach, but there exist on the contrary manifold lines of communication which amid all the emphasizing of the contrast are all too easily forgotten. Examples that readily come to mind are Wilhehn Herrmanu or Martin **Kähler** or the Neo-Lutheranism of the nineteenth century. It is a real question, however, whether the relationship to the nineteenth century does not require to be more carefully considered and reviewed also at *the* very points on which there is today a widespread conviction of having reached a final judgment. **Bultmann's** formulation of the problem certainly points most sharply in that direction. Yet from a great variety of other quarters, too, the question forces itself ever more clearly upon us, whether the practice of all too quickly dismissing the problems which the theology of the nineteenth century wrestled with is not the increasingly discernible weakness of the theological situation today.

This sketch, so far confined to a formal outline, will have to be filled in in the light of the essential theological problems. But before I proceed to that, it is necessary to touch on one more matter which came to be of considerable significance for the present theological and ecclesiastical situation. The commencement of the theological change after the First World War coincided with the task of reorganizing the Evangelical Church in Germany, occasioned by the collapse of the political system with which the Evangelical Church constitution in the form of the system of church government by the civil princes had been closely linked since the Reformation. This external impulse in the year **1918** of course only brought to its close a development which had already been going

on in theory and practice since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Thus it is no wonder that the solution of the constitutional problem was in essence determined by the nineteenth-century beginnings. The theological change that was just in its initial stages came too late to carry any weight at all in the reorganizing of the Evangelical Church. Rather it took its effect in church life only slowly in the course of the twenties, on the one hand through inward renewal of the preaching and on the other through growing criticism of the structure of the Evangelical Church with its nineteenth-century features.

The turbulent political upheaval in the year **1933**, however, prevented the process of church renewal from ripening quietly. The tremendous task which arose for German Protestantism with the coming to a head simultaneously of the ecclesiastical and the political crisis naturally brought with it the possibility of a comprehensive consideration of all the problems of evangelical doctrine and evangelical life that had long been waiting for clarification. The story of the church struggle with its dual front inwards and outwards contains a veritably inexhaustible supply of theological illustrations of the formulation and multiplication of concrete problems. When we speak of the 'experiences of the church struggle', we must of course beware of isolating individual aspects. We must rather look soberly at the whole complex and keep in view among the so-called 'experiences' primarily also all the variations on the theme of failure. It would be false to draw a line under what has happened and let it pass into oblivion. But it would be equally false to complete the urgently needed assimilation of the experiences of the church struggle while remaining rigidly in the battle order of the day, and to maintain the poisonous atmosphere that made clarification so tremendously **difficult**. For although here and there church existence was liberatingly reduced to essentials and its basic elements laid bare and given completely new life, yet at the same time there came also the temptation to safeguard this position by barring the doors to the outside world, and thereby to leave aside the problems which arose from the debate with the historical heritage of Protestantism. The result could therefore hardly fail to be that the reorganization of the church after **1945** only restored a shabby and in many respects unsatisfactory framework in which the struggle for church renewal must now go on. Starting from this position can be fruitful only when we succeed thereby in freeing the whole range of our field of vision. That, however, can only happen when a theology without blinkers maintains its indispensable critical function in the church. But that again depends on whether theology

musters up the necessary measure of self-criticism in reviewing its own history.

II

That changes in the history of theology always display close relations to contemporary variations in the history of thought in general, will appear out of place only to those who dream of the ideal of a *theologia perennis*, i.e. who fail to realize that the pursuit of theology is subject as such to the historicalness of existence and that theology, precisely in so far as it is not free speculation but is bound to a definite *traditio*, which for the Protestant mind means to holy scripture, is an ever new attempt at exposition, i.e. at translation. Thus theology, in so far as it remains true to its task, of its very nature moves with the times, i.e. it accepts the language, thought-forms and approach of the present. Now of course I need only recall the expression 'conforming to the times', which acquired such an ominous tone in the early days of the church struggle, in order to bring before us the full complexity of the problem here involved. Indeed it could actually be said that the question as to the rightness and limits of theology's conforming to the times is really the basic problem of the theological situation today. It is of course an acute question in every age and demands renewed clarification from every generation. For indeed it belongs, as we have said, to the very nature of the theologian's work. But today the question is of greater urgency, and must be set in the centre of the discussion, because the present dominant tendency in theology arose as a reaction against so-called Neo-Protestantism, i.e. against a period in the history of theology in which the motto of conformity to the times was trumps and obviously led to the severest crises in church and theology. For that reason the question as to the rightness and limits of theology's conforming to the times has grown all the more urgent the more we—for the most part certainly with very good reason—contemplate the mistaken developments of two centuries and are therefore inclined in the sharpness of our contradiction of them to overlook the question itself altogether. For it is surely a case of mistaking the problem as such when we suppose that the question of theology's conforming to the times can be met simply by demanding its conformity to scripture, or to the confessions, as if that were an end of the matter. For of course the very concept of conformity to scripture or confession contains itself the problem of exposition and therewith the problem of conformity to the times. And it contributes just as little towards clarification when we suppose that the problem can

be eliminated by calling upon the fact that in virtue of the object it represents theology is at all times necessarily out of conformity with the times. For of course the whole point is precisely, how this lack of conformity with the times is attested at a given juncture in the history of thought. And that brings us again to the problem which we are trying to indicate by the concept of conformity to the times.

That obviously brings us to the basic methodological problem of theology. If a moment ago I called the question as to the rightness and limits of theology's conformity to the times the basic problem of the theological situation today, I could now also adopt a more general formulation: it is the problem of method that in the theological situation today has entered an extremely topical and critical stage. And this could again be formulated still more precisely by saying that the question of hermeneutics forms the focal point of the theological problems of today. A brief glance at the individual theological disciplines can elucidate this assertion. That Old Testament and New Testament scholars come up against the problem of hermeneutics in a special way, is obvious at once. But the same is true also of the discipline of church history—here, indeed, in two respects: first in so far as it is likewise continually concerned with the interpretation of sources, but then also and above all because of course the process of exposition of scripture that goes on in the history of the church presents the hermeneutical problem in its full compass, and thus the question of a theological grasp of the nature of church history opens straight into the basic problem of hermeneutics. The difficult problem of theology's systematic method can be properly solved only when it is likewise set in the light of the question of hermeneutics. For resting on the exposition of scripture and the history of theology, dogmatics has the task of bringing the church's teaching into contact and discussion with contemporary principles of thought, there to submit it to critical sifting and present it in its full inner coherence. Thus here the struggle for the momentarily required translation of the kerygma is brought to its issue in the most comprehensive way—whereby, however, the hermeneutical question in its basic methodological significance is also momentarily brought to a decision. And it is likewise plain that for so-called practical theology, above all in its teaching on sermon, instruction and pastoral care, the hermeneutic question presents the one central problem underlying all questions of detail, in so far as the *applicatio* must not stand unrelated and all on its own alongside the *explicatio*. More particularly also in the study of missions, with its difficult questions (so highly instructive for theological

work as a whole) of translating the biblical message into the languages of totally **different** civilizations, the hermeneutic problem proves to be of fundamental significance. In view of the importance which thus attaches to the hermeneutic question it is necessary to trace out somewhat more closely its **inner** structure in the theological **realm**.

Christianity¹ stands or **falls** with the tie that binds it to its unique historical² origin. That means **first** of all: Christianity is a historic

¹ The theologian rightly has qualms about employing this designation, as **also** with the general concepts 'Protestantism' and 'Catholicism'. Instead of expressing the claim to revelation, as could properly be done only by the term 'church', these concepts smoothe away the peculiarity of the church and fit it into the **realm** of spiritual and religious development-to do which presupposes not only modern ways of thinking but also the rise of the confessional problem in the West since the sixteenth century. Both, of course, stand in close historical **con-**nexion with each other. For the moment the absolute validity of the one Catholic Church was in fact broken and mutually contradictory ways of understanding revelation stood over against each other, there inevitably arose the necessity to provide, irrespective of the question of truth, a neutral designation for the total phenomenon of Christianity, sprung from the same historical root but now separated into opposing parts. Since the Reformation it is impossible to employ 'church' as an unequivocal historical category and assume the identity of its dogmatic and historical meaning. The fact of the confessional division, which can of course be shown to have had a vigorous part in the genesis of modern thinking and the modern consciousness of history, does not release the theologian from the dilemma in which the empirical categories of history and the systematic categories of dogmatics cannot be made simply to coincide. Whoever faces up to the full weight of the confessional problem-it could be shown that that can be done only on Protestant ground--cannot evade the use of categories whose employment requires, from the dogmatic point of view, at least to be corrected. To shirk this **difficulty** would mean failing to grasp the situation in which theology has in fact been placed since the Reformation and not just since about the middle of the seventeenth century.

Incidentally, in thus referring to the significance which the confessional split has for the method and language of theology we must, at least in the form of a passing reference, ward off the mistaken view that from the purely dogmatic standpoint the confessional problem really did not arise until the sixteenth century. The *una sancta ecclesia catholica in* demonstrable and undisputed unity is a thing which never existed in history. To that extent the confessional problem is as old as Christianity itself. The special significance of the sixteenth century for the confessional problem is merely that here for the first time since Constantine within the same political area (namely, the West, or to put it more precisely, the Empire) mutually opposing churches and views of revelation were accorded public and legal recognition. This political event, which has its basis in intellectual conditions that can certainly no longer be set aside, has come to be of revolutionary significance also for the history of the church and of theology.

² For the understanding of what follows, it should be noted that German has two not entirely interchangeable words for 'historical': *historisch* and *geschichtlich*. The distinction may be roughly expressed by saying that *geschichtlich* means belonging to the succession of events, while *historisch* means accessible to, or connected with, the methods of scientific historical research. I have tried here

phenomenon. It derives from a definite historical past and therefore stands in historical relation to that past. But the proposition that Christianity stands or falls with the tie that binds it to its unique historical origin means much more than that. It contains an assertion which is paradoxical in comparison with all other phenomena in history. For it not only means that the historical origin of Christianity has the peculiarity of a **primum movens** at the beginning of a process of development in history, but it ascribes to this historical origin once and for all abiding, normative, absolute significance for the whole historic phenomenon of Christianity in its entirety. That is, the historical origin of Christianity is assigned the character of revelation. It is thereby withdrawn from the relativity and transience of all historic events. It forms a **realm** which is once and for all defined, distinguished from all the other phenomena of history—a judgment which **finds** expression in the **fixing** of the canon of holy scripture.

The bearing of that of course does not become plain until what is claimed to be revelation is more closely defined. What counts as revelation is not so much (I am purposely expressing myself vaguely, in order to leave room for the multiplicity of ways of understanding revelation that meet us in the history of Christianity) or at least not in the first instance holy scripture. For what counts as revelation is not so much, or at least not in the first instance, the disclosure and communication of general timeless truths. On the contrary, revelation is primarily and properly a definite event—namely, the event attested in holy scripture—which again, to **define** it still more closely and state its absolute peculiarity, is the appearance of Jesus Christ. To this event, then—the event of revelation in the most proper sense, and the one in which at the same time the historical origin of Christianity is **concentrated**—there belongs once and for all abiding, normative, absolute significance. The event in question is one which, although it is attested as a unique historical event and as such belongs to a definitely fixed past, nevertheless does not become a thing of the past but has a constant present quality. The historical Jesus of Nazareth is proclaimed as the present Lord exalted to the right hand of God, the work wrought in his suffering, dying and rising again is proclaimed as the salvation that is wrought for all time and therefore always present.

These sentences, which have attempted to outline first of all in a **purely** descriptive way, and therefore as broadly and neutrally as **pos-**

(as far as possible) to use 'historic' (sometimes 'in history') for the former and 'historical' for the **latter-Translator**.

sible, what for Christianity is the constitutive understanding of its origin and nature, have a very profound bearing on the hermeneutic question. If to begin with we disregard for a moment all the problems which have arisen in this respect since the dawning of modern times, then the result is the following picture of the ancient and medieval church's view, over against which we shall set point for point the position of the Reformers and the early **Protestants**.¹

1. The question arises as to what are the ontological categories under which the event of revelation is to be comprehended. In this the two tendencies of fully preserving both its historicity and its revelational character have both had to be respected to the full. The ancient church attempted to do that by applying at one and the same time both physical and metaphysical, historical and metahistorical categories to the event of revelation. That found its classic outcome in the formulae of the Christological dogma, in the thought of the history of redemption, and also in the practice that became a model for all later dogmatics of combining the trinitarian and the redemptive-history structure in the Credo. With that a canon of exposition was set up which exercised the function of a bulwark, on the one hand to secure for the event of revelation its place in the world and its history, but on the other hand to isolate it at the same time from the world and its history. For the event of revelation so interpreted was in fact after all from the ontological point of view an event sui *generis* and therefore in principle inviolable. But precisely this attempt at an ontological interpretation of the event of revelation offered the possibility of linking up with a previous general metaphysical view, as taken over from Greek philosophy, surmounting it to be sure, but allowing its validity in principle and so reconciling natural thought and supernatural revelation.

The Reformation upset this ontological interpretation of the event of revelation, but did not in principle surrender it. It is true that in shifting the accent from the metaphysical categories to the personalistic redemptive-history categories it destroyed the scholastic system, but for all that it still allowed a metaphysical and metahistorical common sense that

¹ This in itself points at once to the intermingling of the confessional and the hermeneutic problems. It is on a different understanding of the relation between church (or revelation) and history that the confessions part company. To **realize** this seems to me to provide standpoints that are essential for the carrying out of any study of the confessions that is to succeed in reaching beyond a purely polemic, or merely static and descriptive, presentation and achieving a theological grasp of the confessional problem as such. I must here content myself with this pointer.

remained within **the** framework of the traditional way of thinking. The revolutionary new element in its understanding of revelation was gained without departing from the traditional general principles of thought—a circumstance which again and again presents us with great **difficulties** in interpreting the theology of the Reformers, as could be shown for example with Luther's doctrine of the **two** kingdoms. The revival of a modified scholasticism in early Protestant Orthodoxy is the historical **proof** of how easy it was to overlook, or not take at all seriously, the doubts the Reformers had cast on the ontological interpretation of the event of revelation. Thus the Reformation certainly altered radically the **objective** understanding of the meaning of the event of revelation, but not the general speculative presuppositions in which the event of revelation had become embedded and anchored by church tradition.

2. Bound up with the ontological interpretation of the event of revelation is the view of holy scripture. If revelation from the ontological point of view is an event *sui generis*, **if** by means of metaphysical and metahistorical categories a separate place is thus provided for it in the world and its history, then there belongs to it a certain definable sphere in which it shines and which is illumined by it in a special way. Then there is a *historia sacra* which exists alongside secular history and is to be assessed by **different** standards from it. Then too, however, the witness to this *historia sacra* is a literary genus of a wholly peculiar kind, in fact holy scripture. Since it is the sole way of approach to the revelation, it even comes to take the place of revelation. As communication of revelation it must be ontologically the same in kind as the event of revelation itself. The Christological dogma of the two natures is mirrored again in the doctrine of scripture. It, too, is of human and divine nature at the same time. It, too, stands in spite of its human nature so to speak outside the context of original sm. It is infallible. To the dogma of incarnation there corresponds the dogma of verbal inspiration. This duplication of the miracle of revelation inevitably brings with it an extension and multiplication of the content of revelation. The quality of revelation now belongs to every single communication in the Bible as such. Its picture of the world and of history supplies the unquestioned basis of the Christian world view.

This idea of scripture, which in the ancient and medieval church in **spite of its** validity in principle was nevertheless (for reasons to be discussed under our next point) not the only determining factor in the understanding of revelation, was again deeply shaken at the Reformation **but** in practice not subjected to thoroughgoing critical revision. The

concentration of the scripture testimony upon Jesus Christ as *the* Word of God and the differentiation of law and Gospel as a **rule** for the exposition of scripture set up an extraordinarily critical canon within the canon. The preponderance, it is true, which in the opposition to the Catholic understanding of revelation was now accorded exclusively to scripture had at once the result that this sole surviving foundation amid the great collapse of authorities was brought into agreement after all with the traditional views by being safeguarded also in theory as an unassailable realm **sui generis**, while the critical pressure of the material principle was taken up and balanced out by the formal principle and the doctrine of verbal inspiration received an intensification and a **fundamentalistic** significance that were hitherto unknown.

3. The understanding of revelation and the concept of scripture are the presuppositions which lead to the heart of the hermeneutic question, to the problem of how revelation becomes a present actuality. Since the uniqueness, **completedness** and historicity of revelation is maintained in principle, the relation to revelation is essentially of a historical kind. Revelation's claim **to** validity for the present is made room for by recognizing its content as unalterable truth. To that extent the distance in history from revelation is not seen as a hindrance **to** its significance for the present. Literal historical exegesis is therefore recognized as the foundation of the church's exposition of scripture. Nevertheless the possibilities of conflict between the literal meaning and the requirements arising from the application to the present are not entirely excluded. They are indeed reduced to a **minimum** by the fact that the particular expositor shares the Bible's picture of the world and of history from the start, naively and without conflict, as a presupposition that has become a traditional heritage of civilization. For the rest, however, any difficulties that may arise are cleared away by harmonizing, circumvented by an eclectic use of scripture, or explained with the help of a church tradition of doctrine that amplifies and develops revelation. Special, but yet supplementary rather than decisive, significance attaches to the method of using allegorical interpretation to turn to good account those passages also which are unproductive or offensive when it comes to relating them to the present.

Yet these remarks **on** the technical aspect of the exposition of scripture bring us only to the beginning of what has to be said on the question of how revelation becomes a present actuality. If the identification of holy scripture and revelation is taken as the starting point, then the present actualization is effected by means of the binding force of the doctrinal

and moral teaching derived from scripture, that is, via the law which finds its realization in the present life of the church and of the individual believer. But that already leads to certain difficulties for the actualization. Thus, for example, specific instructions of Jesus to his disciples that were conditioned by the situation are not susceptible of direct and general realization in the present. In this case the actualization can be achieved by imitative reconstruction of an exceptional situation, by assimilation of the present to the past. This procedure, which in the medieval sects, for example, became a danger to the church but was domesticated in monasticism, could be termed the method of actualization by imitative historizing. In the case of the doctrinal teachings, especially in so far as they affect the event of revelation, the aim of actualization can at the least be supported by the method of actualization by contemplative historizing. We transpose ourselves into the past so as thereby to become contemporaneous with it. Promoting contemplation of the event in the mind's eye, meditative entering into the experience, intensified into sharing in it as if we were there ourselves, representation in mime, but also repetition of the course of the events of revelation in the ordering of the Christian year, or immediate actualization of the past event by means of relics or pilgrimages to sites of the sacred **history**—all these are phenomena that must be seen in their conjunction with the basic hermeneutic problem of the present actualization of past revelation.

But while in the actualization by imitative historizing and by contemplative historizing we have to do with methods in which the emphasis lies on the activity proceeding from man in the present, the Roman Catholic Church has always put the principal accent on those ways of actualizing revelation in which the revealing reality actively actualizes itself. As an intermediate form we must mention mystical actualization, which indeed historically often stands in closest connexion with the actualization by contemplative historizing. In mystical actualization, in which human activity and passivity hang peculiarly in the balance, direct contact with the revealing reality is provided in the sense of immediate experience, so that the time factor is excluded altogether. The encounter takes place in timeless eternity. That itself, it is true, points towards the fact that in mystical actualization the element of being related to the revelation in history all too easily vanishes altogether, the church's concept of revelation is lost, and hence too holy scripture as a means of helping towards the actualization disappears. Indeed, with the pure form of mysticism there can be no more talk at all of the hermeneutic problem of actualization.

While the relation to the church's understanding of revelation and redemption here recedes, to say the least, entirely into the background, it is preserved in the case of another form in which it is now, also exclusively, the self-actualization of the revealing reality that is maintained. I should like to call this form realistic metaphysical actualization. If a moment ago in **connexion** with the actualization by contemplative historizing I mentioned relics, then there was only half a right to do so at that point. For-if I may put it so for once-the hermeneutic relevance of relics lies not so much in the fact that they stimulate the contemplative historizing actualization as rather in the fact that in them the **unique** past event of revelation is itself present. Relics do not only remind us of the past, nor are they present merely as dead remains of the past, but in them the saving power that derives from the unique historical saving event is still abidingly alive and present in direct continuity. Relics mediate, precisely by representing in the crassest way the historicity of the event of revelation, the immediate entry to the realm of the past distinguished by revelation. True, only so to speak to a tiny corner of that realm. But all the same, here actualization takes place without the detour via the literary testimony to the past in holy scripture. Here the past is directly present. Relics are of course only a special case of what I mean by realistic metaphysical actualization. The whole history of redemption indeed, although past in the historical sense, is in the realistic metaphysical sense present in the form of its outstanding representatives, the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and saints including Mary the Queen of Heaven. To them we have access not only in historic remembrance but as immediate contemporaries. We can turn to them for intercession and help, and they intervene actively in the events of the present. Sometimes, indeed, it even happens that the veil that hides from ordinary eyes this heavenly transfiguration of the historical past is lifted for a moment, say through an apparition of the Virgin. Let it not be said that that has nothing to do with the hermeneutic problem. Only think what it means for our relation to the Bible story when we believe in its historical figures at the same time as existing in the real metaphysical present !

But all that is of secondary importance compared with what Catholicism considers the central thing: the way the event of revelation actualizes itself, in sacramental actualization. Let us confine ourselves here to the sacrament in which the relation to the historically unique event of revelation, the decisive thing for the hermeneutic problem, is most clearly expressed: the sacrifice of the Mass. It is a false picture of the

Catholic position when the repeatedly celebrated sacrifice of the Mass is understood as an amplificatory repetition of the sacrifice once for all on Golgotha. It is not that an *infinite* number of momentarily present sacrifices take their place alongside the one historical one, but the one historical sacrifice is sacramentally present in the many. And present, too, apart from any symbolical or spiritualistic interpretation: objectively, even *extra usum sacramenti, in the* transubstantiated host. The hermeneutic problem of the present actualization of the historically *unique* is here solved in such a radical way that a hermeneutic question in the narrower sense really no longer exists at all. For the question that arises primarily in regard to the exposition of *scripture*—the question how far what is therein attested as the event of revelation has decisive significance for the present—is taken out of the context of scripture exposition and answered by the objective event of the sacrament. The real actualization of the event of revelation does not at all take place via scripture and its exposition in the sermon, but solely via the sacrament. For through scripture exposition the revelation always becomes present only as law, solely in the sacrament on the other hand as grace.

Yet now there is still one final step we must take if we wish to have a reasonably complete grasp of the solution found by the Catholic system to the question of the present actuality of the historically unique event of revelation. The crown and consummation is the actualization through a spiritual institution. At this stage, too, the tension between the historical and the present is grandiosely reconciled. The institution of the Roman Church, existing in unbroken episcopal succession from the days of the apostles to the present, is the continuing mystical body of Christ with the *Vicarius Christi* at its head. It possesses the Charisma *veritatis*, culminating in the infallible teaching office of the pope. It is the abiding representation of the incarnation. The revelation once for all in history has entered for all time into history. The perfect tense of the event of revelation is swallowed up by the continuous present of the church.

The revolution which the Reformation produced in the complex of questions just sketched is so tremendous that it could be said: the antithesis between Catholicism and Protestantism rests on the *different* understanding of the present actualization of the historical *ἄπαξ* (once-for-all-ness) of revelation. The Reformation achieves the tremendous feat of reducing everything to this, that the historical *ἄπαξ* of revelation becomes present in faith alone. The *sola fide* of the Reformation is directed not only against justification by works and thereby against a

legalistic exposition of scripture, not only against mysticism and against multiplication of the revealing reality in the form of saints and against materialization of the revealing reality in the form of sacred objects. But the *sola fide* has undoubtedly also an anti-sacramental and an anti-clerical point. To the *sola fide* there corresponds *solus Christus*. Revelation and the present are separated from each other in such a way that only one bridge remains: the Word alone—and indeed, lest any misunderstanding should arise, the Word interpreted as salvation *sola gratia, sola fide*. All other bridges have been broken up. The whole system of Catholicism has thereby collapsed. There is no such thing as a simple, matter-of-fact presence of revelation. But the actualization of revelation, understood as the self-actualization of Christ, takes place in each individual case **through the Word—*sola fide, sola gratia***. We will not dwell on the dearness of the price paid for this change in the understanding of the present actualization of the $\alpha\pi\alpha\chi$ of revelation. Humanly speaking the price was a frightful impoverishment of religious life and an alarming surrender of religious safeguards. We will only ask what was thereby gained in regard to the question that concerns us here. For one thing: the re-establishment of the $\alpha\pi\alpha\chi$ in all its stringency and exclusiveness, and therewith the purification of the content of revelation from amplifications, additions and adulterations. And for another: the assurance of salvation that lies in the *pro me*. For the actualization as Catholicism understands it is such in and for itself. The question of appropriation remains the great point of uncertainty. Whereas Christ's becoming present in **faith** as the Reformers understand it takes place *pro me*. The question of appropriation can no longer be separated from it at all.

This revolution brought about by the Reformers had far-reaching consequences for theology's method. First of all this: that theology acquired growing significance for the church. In the clerical church of the sacrament, theology, however vast may be the resources expended on it, is a peripheral matter. Whereas in the church of the Word, theology serves the preaching which is the source of faith. Moreover: theology becomes primarily exegesis. And historical exegesis at that, which breaks through the accumulated rubble of tradition to the original text. Further—as is already indicated by the last remark—**theology becomes critical theology**. For the Reformation, that certainly does not yet mean critical historical theology in today's sense, though there do exist notable first steps in that direction. Rather, the criticism takes its start from scripture as its centre, and to begin with becomes predominantly **criti-**

cism of tradition. And **finally**: for theology in the Reformers' sense the **hermeneutic** question acquires fundamental significance, and that precisely to the extent that it is theology of the Word. In the hermeneutic question is concentrated the whole problematical nature of theology whose full weight Protestantism has to bear. For it possesses no church tradition alongside scripture to relieve the problems set by the exposition of scripture. And it has no infallible teaching office over it, but enjoys the freedom of having to bear its own responsibility for its work, bound solely to the scriptures. And the very question as to what that bond implies is again part of the hermeneutic problem.

But now, this sketch of the Reformers' position is-it must be openly admitted-from the historical point of view a stylized one. I do not mean we have not caught its essential features. But that is not everything. The situation in detail is essentially more complicated. The relation to Catholicism is not exhausted by the plain, antithetical statements I have employed. The Reformers' exposition of scripture, too, presupposed as self-evident the validity of the biblical picture of the world and of history. It, too, finds in metaphysical reality a bridge that joins past and present. The church of the Word also has sacraments. It, too, has an ordered ministry. It, too, takes over a part of the primitive church tradition. It, too, exists in historical continuity. That leads to a further element in the structure of the hermeneutic problem.

4. I began by saying that Christianity stands or falls with the tie that binds it to its unique historical origin. From that there arose the problems, first of the ontological interpretation of the event of revelation, secondly of the view of the testimony to this event of revelation, i.e. of holy scripture, and then thirdly of the present actualization of the event of revelation. But now there is still a fourth problem that presents itself-namely, the problem of the historic character of the present actualization of the event of revelation. Christianity is, in spite of the tie that binds it to its unique historical origin-which bond actualizes itself when the event of revelation becomes present, and is thus not only a postulate but a bond that again and again rises in actual fact-Christianity, I say, is for all that not a phenomenon that abides always identical and unchanged, but it exists in history, i.e. it is subject to the march of time. It can never simply remain precisely the same as it was at the start; for then it would not exist in history at all. But how, then, can it remain identical with itself in the absolute sense presupposed by the statement that Christianity stands or falls with the tie that binds it to its unique historical **origin?**—'in an absolute sense', because this

unique historical origin claims to be revelation in the utterly absolute sense. It is of course the basic structure of all historic being that it exists in the dialectic of constancy and change. Mutation can take place only in a thing that remains identical with itself. To the essence of the historic there belong not only the several variations of each new moment, but at the same time also continuity of being, not only change but also tradition. But now, does not transience likewise belong to the nature of historic existence? Is it not only the transitory, the relative that can vary? Christianity, however, makes the claim to exist in history as something absolute, intransitory. But what, then, is the relation of the historic mutation to the identity of the absolute?

To this problem, which is presented to us by the simple fact of the history of the church and of theology, a solution has been sought in the formula that here the divine and the human, the eternal and the temporal, exist side by side. The human and temporal element is said to be the changing forms, the divine and eternal one the content that abides identical and unchanged. But to formulate it that way really only describes the problem here presented—and that, too, by applying the categories of form and content in a highly questionable way. For the distinction of form and content suggests the idea that the content can be separated from the form. But how can e.g. the content of a theological statement be separated from its form? That is in fact precisely the **difficulty—that** the content can be had only in a particular form. If it were desired to separate e.g. the content of the Credo from its particular form, then that could really only be done in a new form. There is certainly a problem here that presses for the making of a distinction. But it seems to me the proper distinction here is not one of form and content, but of word and exposition. The problem of how the church exists amid the mutations of history and yet is bound absolutely to its unique historical origin, constantly changing and yet remaining identical with itself, is thereby set in the light of the hermeneutic question. I consider the category of exposition the only proper one for coming to grips with the question of the nature of the history of church and theology. For the category of exposition embraces the historic character of the present actualization of the event of revelation.

How does the Roman Catholic Church now come to terms with the fact of mutations in the history of church and theology? Again in a compelling way. As extension of the incarnation the church is, like the incarnation, ontologically a phenomenon *sui generis*. It is divine and human at once, not however in the sense of the distinction between form

and Content but by way of a juxtaposition of concrete, historically demonstrable factors of divine and human origin-which of course in practice are not always easy to distinguish from each other. But in principle the distinction is certainly maintained-in dogmatics for example between infallible statements *de fide* and discussible *opiniones*, or in ecclesiastical law between *ius divinum* and *ius humanum*. That leaves room for both things: there is a changing element and an unchanging one. The unchanging element exists in the history of the church from the beginning in unbroken continuity. The changing element varies according to the particular circumstances. To that extent all historic mutations affect the church only on the periphery. And even the changing element is, thanks to the principle of tradition, generally of astonishing stability. At bottom, however, the church goes through no historic changes. To be sure, the truth contained in it from the beginning can pass through stages of successive unfolding. Thus new dogmas can be proclaimed by the infallible teaching office of the church. But this process is not mutation, not change, but only generic growth. In this peculiar combination and interpenetration of the historic and the supra-historic the Roman church has in history an astounding stability and elasticity at the same time.

The Reformation broke with the presuppositions of this way of looking at church history and thereby surrendered also the historical advantages of this view. It knows no divine church law that can be defined and established as such. It knows no infallible ecclesiastical decisions on doctrine either. It knows no demonstrable institutional guarantee for the continuous existence of the church in history. In the distinction between the visible and the invisible church this lack of any guarantee for the church in history finds its crystallization. Church history presents itself as the story of apostasy, in which there shine a few scattered *testes veritatis*, until at last the Gospel was discovered anew at the Reformation. As a result of the Reformation the problem of the relation between church and history arose in an entirely new way. But in the Reformation itself this problem was not sufficiently worked out. That, if I am not mistaken, becomes specially clear at two points.

For one thing, in the relation between the Reformation and early Christianity. The rediscovery of the right understanding of the Gospel, the recourse to scripture alone, and the abandonment of all interpolated human precepts in the doctrine and order of the church only too easily suggested the idea that the Reformation was simply a reduction of the church's history to its historical origin. Certainly the one thing Luther

can least of all be reproached with is a legalistic biblicism. And yet it is a simple fact that the Reformation was not sufficiently aware of its own distance from early Christianity. For that reason there was no reflexion upon the question of the historic mutations of Christianity. We could also say: the Reformation was not critical enough of itself. That can be seen from the fact that the question whether its theology conformed to scripture was one it was all too ready to answer directly in the **affirmative**, without seeing the distance that necessarily and rightly separates the interpreter's exposition and assimilation of a text from its original historical meaning, to say nothing of direct errors of interpretation. And thus the question of what was to be the future relation to the Reformer's theology and their exposition of scripture was also one that was **not** worked out clearly enough. The idea all too soon arose that the theology of the Reformers was of conclusive **significance**, at least in so far as it had crystallized **itself in** the Confessions, that the only task now still remaining for theology was to preserve this newly formed church tradition and expound the scriptures in its light. It was not sufficiently clearly realized that post-reformation theology must not be simply Reformed scholasticism, and that Reformed scholasticism in spite of its attempts at most loyal conservation is by no means identical with Reformation theology. It was therefore inevitable that one day the time should come when a mere conservation of Reformation theology was obviously **no** longer enough, when changed days with their changes in thought and language brought home to Protestant theology that it was obliged to use the means of the present and face the problems of the present in studying theology and expounding scripture.

The other point at which it becomes clear that the problem of the relation between church and history which arose as a result of the Reformation was not sufficiently worked out by the Reformation, is the question of church order, i.e. of the church's shape in history. It may have been entirely right that in this respect Lutheranism did not set to work with a purist's biblicism, and in spite of the breakthrough **to** the New Testament left standing much of the heritage of early catholic tradition. But it was not really clearly realized what that implies for the fundamental problem of the relation between church and history. Likewise the path towards the system of church government by the civil princes may have been wholly unavoidable, and in sixteenth-century Germany even entirely right. But again it was not realized plainly enough that such time-conditioned solutions must not be preserved indefinitely. And if in Lutheranism a certain magnanimity and indifference towards

the so-called outward forms of the church justified that procedure, then at **any rate** the vindication of it by the argument about the neutrality of the form compared with the content is a sign that not enough attention was paid to the question of the historic character of the church.

III

The development of the hermeneutic problem as a whole in **all its general** theological implications, but in the first instance without regard to the special questions of today, must be kept in view if we wish to assess the significance of the rise of the critical historical method. For the comparison of the Catholic position with that of the Reformers has shown how deeply the revolution of the sixteenth century affects the whole hermeneutic problem, yet how little on the other hand the Reformation itself was in a position to subject the questions that thereby arose, or was interested in subjecting them, to a comprehensive examination in respect of their methodological and material consequences. It would be short-sighted to make that a reproach to the Reformation. For the full effects of the Reformation on the history of thought could in the nature of the case develop only gradually. And the very fact that the theology of the Reformers was so deeply entwined in their medieval heritage proves that the upheaval of the Reformation primarily came not from without, from the general changes in the history of thought at the close of the Middle Ages, but from within, from the understanding of revelation allowing as far as possible the validity of the accepted principles of thought. But for that very reason it would likewise be short-sighted to seal up the testimony of the Reformation within what was, rightly understood, a traditional situation that could not possibly be preserved. There has doubtless been much mischief caused by the idea of permanent reformation. Nevertheless it must be taken seriously in two respects. Firstly, in so far as the Word of God must be left free to assert itself in an unflinchingly critical manner against distortions and fixations. But secondly-and on closer inspection this is included in the first-in so far as theology and preaching should be free to make a translation into whatever language is required at the moment and to refuse to be satisfied with correct, archaizing repetition of 'pure doctrine'. And this very task of carrying on the heritage of the Reformation in a way that genuinely moves with the times necessarily led to the point where in regard to the general principles of thought certain problems that had very rightly remained untouched at the Reformation arose and demanded a decision such as was not to be gamed from the utterances

of the Reformers and from the Confessions. To these problems that necessarily emerged sooner or later there belonged, however, **first** and foremost the hermeneutic problem, which as a result of the Reformation had already in actual fact—though how far that was recognized is another question—been made central and set on a new theological basis, but only hesitatingly come to grips with in all its implications.

The question therefore now arises, what the appearance of the critical historical method implies for the complex of problems we have described, and what connexion it has with the basic principle from which the Reformers set out and which inevitably made clarification of the whole hermeneutic problem a necessary step towards further progress. From all the many viewpoints that here force themselves on the mind I can select only a few.

1. It leads only to obscuring the nature of the problem when the critical historical method is held to be a purely formal scientific technique, entirely free of presuppositions, whose application to the historical objects in the theological realm provokes no conflicts and does no hurt to the dogmatic structure. Even though it will prove in a higher sense to be correct that the critical historical method does not destroy the truth of the Christian faith, yet we certainly must not make light of the **difficulties** that here arise. For historical criticism is more than lively historical interest. Even the early and medieval churches concerned themselves more or less with history and the study of its sources, and therefore also always provided a certain measure of criticism where legends and falsifications of history were concerned. At the close of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and Humanism put new life into the historical, and therewith also the critical, sense. And the Reformation, however exclusively guided by essentially theological interests, arrived at surprisingly sharp and accurate verdicts on many individual historical questions. The demands of confessional apologetics and polemics then intensified the study of history in both camps under the discipline of keeping a sharp eye on each other. And yet that was all merely accompaniment, but was not of revolutionary significance for the church's teaching and the generally recognized traditional picture of the world and of history. It was not what we know today as the critical historical method. For the latter is not concerned with the greatest possible refinement of the philological methods, but with subjecting the tradition to critical examination on the basis of new principles of thought. The critical historical method first arose out of the intellectual revolution of modern times. It is—not just, say, where it oversteps its legitimate

limits, but by its very nature-bound up with criticism of content. In its concern with the past and its interpretation of the sources of the past **it cannot** simply set, aside the understanding of reality as that has been **acquired** by the modern mind. It is therefore closely coupled with the advance of the sciences and with the development of philosophy. Certainly, it is thereby in danger of becoming uncritical in the other direction, of succumbing to the influences of what is modern for the moment and of employing improper standards in its historical criticism. But even where men have recognized this danger, they have not seen themselves compelled to abandon in principle the path they have taken, but only to be the more careful and the more critical of themselves in repeatedly testing also the appropriateness of their own presuppositions.

2. In order to grasp the nature of the critical historical method it is thus necessary to take account of the intellectual change in the modern age. In doing so we can set aside the vexed question advanced (with at all events extraordinarily fruitful results) by Dilthey and Troeltsch—the question of the historical roots of the modern age and the precise time at which it began. It is doubtless correct that the great breach in the dam took place only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And this, too, is certain—nor indeed is it fundamentally denied by Troeltsch's usually roughly-quoted thesis—that the Reformation has its place among the antecedents of the change in question, while on the other hand the view which is not only repeatedly advocated by Catholicism and the Eastern Church but also proudly championed in much of Neo-Protestantism, and according to which the modern outlook is directly or even exclusively descended from the Reformation, is certainly false. We naturally cannot enter either into the endless question of the inner development and change in modern thought itself. We must confine ourselves to the question whether there is a common factor that fundamentally and irrevocably marks off the modern age as a whole from all preceding Western history, and in what that common factor consists.

First of all a negative point : in the modern age the Christian faith has forfeited the self-evident validity that was ascribed to it in Western history for more than a millennium. It is no longer accorded any formal authority that stands *extra controversiam*. Self-evident universal validity is now possessed only by what man as such with his rational and empirical faculties can know, perceive, prove and control. That, however, leads to **a positive point** : in the modern age there exists on a previously unknown **scale a** realm of new self-evident assumptions whose validity even the

Christian cannot evade-and that not even when they stand in contradiction to the sort of views which before the dawn of the modern age belonged to the self-evident assumptions of the Christian world-view. But from this **realm** of the new self-evident assumptions we have now to distinguish the dimension of the problematical which is everywhere latent within it. It would be a serious mistake to suppose that modern thinking knows only the realm of the self-evident and that therefore one of the consequences of modern thinking would be to deny the dimension of the problematical altogether. It is quite true that the history of modern thought is full of examples to show that the attempt at such a denial has repeatedly been made, that the realm of the self-evident has thus been posited as absolute. But all these attempts prove to be illegitimate extension of the **realm** of the self-evident into the dimension of the problematical. The course of the history of modern thought, with its infinite variety of absolute systems succeeding and excluding each other, itself refutes the possibility of eliminating the dimension of the problematical, or expanding the realm of the self-evident to cover it.

But now, the usefulness of this distinction between the self-evident and the problematical depends upon how it is possible to define them over against each other. It is not a case of distinguishing separate spheres of being or of reality. It is rather a case of an epistemological distinction. And with the introduction of this distinction it must not be held that the boundary can be certainly determined once and for all. For the realm of the self-evident manifestly changes in the course of history, and it would betray an unhistorical way of thinking if we were to consider the present self-evident assumptions as **finally** and unchangeably established. The boundaries between the self-evident and the problematical are much rather open, fluid boundaries. That, however, does not exclude the possibility that in the realm of the self-evident, verdicts and critical corrections can be arrived at that are universally binding and changes in thought made that can never be unmade again. I am aware of the great difficulty of the questions I am touching here, and the utter impossibility of mastering them in this short compass. Yet I consider it important to recognize and come to grips with the task here characterized. For the clarification of the question how far the self-evident assumptions are legitimate self-evident assumptions or illegitimate ones has a decisive bearing on our methods of exposition in general and hence on our methods in theological work in particular.

If I may just venture one closer definition merely by way of a suggestion, then the fundamental change never again to be unmade which

came over the self-evident assumptions with the dawn of the modern age seems to me to consist legitimately in the following: First in a restriction, namely in the elimination of all metaphysical statements from the realm of the self-evident. And then in an extension, namely in the relative autonomy of science and of social life. 'Relative autonomy' is intended to mean that here, while respecting the proximity of the problematical and refraining from absolutism, i.e. refraining from taking the non-self-evident as self-evident-or we could also say, in a state of aporia where metaphysics is concerned-men can after all attain to an understanding that is universally binding. Or to put it more concretely: it is a legitimate self-evident assumption of the modern age, never again to be unmade, that neither the church nor any world-view that supposes *itself* absolute may impugn the relative autonomy of science and of social life. That the modern age is in actual fact full of repeated attempts to do that after all in one form or another, that in the modern age the **self-evident** assumption in question is thus not everywhere recognized and treated as self-evident, merely makes clear that in the so-called **self-evident** assumptions we have not to do with automatisms but with claims to validity.

If the changed intellectual situation by which the modern age is dominated is worked out in the way I have tried at least to indicate, then the view must surely become untenable which sees the rise of the modern age as essentially revolt from the Christian faith, or something in the nature of a second Fall. The designation of the Enlightenment as the age of consummate **sinfulness** derives, as is well known, from **Fichte**, and in his case arises from a view that could hardly be agreeable to those who as Christians adopt the same judgment with regard not only to the Enlightenment but to the whole modern age and would dearly love to undo this Fall by means of a radical de-secularization of scientific and public life. Quite apart from the fact that even these fundamental opponents of the modern age are for the most part completely unable to avoid its self-evident assumptions and, when it comes right down to it, have no wish to avoid them either, and when in actual fact they do it, really only do it in illegitimate and inwardly false, or at least badly thought-out and inconsistent ways-quite apart from that, there is another thing that must be taken much more seriously: is this basic structure of the modern mind not something that is entirely in accordance with the Christian faith? Is it not of the essence of that faith that it is not found a place in the **realm** of the self-evident but for the natural man as such belongs entirely in the dimension of the problematical?

Can it do any harm to the Christian faith if it can no longer be **confused** with a particular view of the world or a particular social or political plan for the shaping of the world, if faith can no longer pledge itself to take the place of responsible thinking, and if, as against any hybridizing tendencies, the world is discovered again in all its worldliness, i.e. is secularized? Indeed, is it not entirely in accordance with the Christian faith if in the undoubtedly existing tendency of the modern mind to take the realm of its own self-evident assumptions and illegitimately and in violation of these self-evident assumptions-make it absolute, the godlessness of the world comes more plainly to light than when it clothes itself with the semblance of Christianity? And can there be anything more foolish than seeking to make capital for the Christian faith out of these tendencies to absolutism by pressing them into the service of the Christian cause and trying, say, to take advantage of such reactionary aspects of the modern age as e.g. the cry for authority from a world weary of thinking and of responsibility? Could the remarkable situation not indeed arise that the Christian faith is obliged, is perhaps even the only thing still able, to put up an energetic **defence** of the self-evident assumptions which the modern age brought into being but has itself denied, such as freedom of research, tolerance, etc.? Certainly, the relation to the basic structure of thought in the modern age is the decisive point for the understanding of the Christian faith. Here a deep gulf becomes visible between Catholicism and Protestantism.

3. What now is the inner connexion between the critical historical method and the modern mind's principles of thought? They made it possible, because only with the collapse of traditional Western metaphysics, i.e. with the loss of its self-evident character, did men become fully aware of the historic character of existence. For it was only when the absoluteness of the hitherto dominant picture of the world and of history disappeared, when to prove a thing traditional was no longer to prove it true, when not only particular phenomena in history but history itself ceased in **principle** to have unconditionally binding and materially decisive authority as such, when men therefore discovered the fact of historic change, of the time-conditioned character of each event and of our distance from it in history-it was only then that there came the freedom, but also the sheer necessity, to regard historical events in their pure historicity, i.e. objectively, from the distance. Only then came the extraordinary sharpening of the critical eye for the question of dependability and genuineness of sources, for cases of historical dependence, interconnexion and change. In short : only then could the whole **appar-**

atus of historical research, as it has become a matter of course for us today, be fully developed.

But that is surely not yet all that can be said. The really decisive and **revolutionary** thing about the critical historical method came from the **fact** that the modern historian sees himself compelled to take the sources **of the** past and set them, too, in the light of the new self-evident assumptions. Not that he foists these new self-evident assumptions on to the witnesses of the past, as if they had been self-evident assumptions also for them, but he does examine the factual content of their testimony on **the** basis of these self-evident assumptions. Thus he will not accept the truth e.g. of statements which presuppose the Ptolemaic picture of the world, not even when for the rest the source has a high degree of historical dependability. The modern historian is rightly convinced that he **knows** certain things better. The fact that for the modern age all that is metaphysical and metahistorical has entered the dimension of the problematical is also a thing the modern historian cannot simply put out of his mind when reading sources which presuppose the self-evident character of the metaphysical and metahistorical. He cannot, for example, accept the self-evident validity of statements which introduce metaphysical beings in the sense of the older picture of the world as internal factors in the world and its history—just as of course he himself also oversteps the boundaries of scientific method if for his own part he tries to explain something historically problematical by means of metaphysical statements, i.e. to render it self-evident. He is therefore also unable to take over the recognition of a special **historia sacra** or **scriptura sacra** in the ontological sense as a self-evident intellectual presupposition influencing his method of research. He deals with all historic and literary phenomena of the past by the same method, **viz-the** critical historical method, which can certainly undergo infinite modifications according to the nature of the particular historical object, but which cannot be **put** fundamentally out of currency by any historical object.

In the circumstances in history in which the intellectual transition to the modern age took place, it was natural that theology was more especially **affected** by the awakening of the historical consciousness and that the battle very soon became hottest in the **realm** of scripture exposition. And the most amazing thing about the history of theology in modern times is, that it was above all the theologians themselves who dauntlessly and inexorably employed the critical historical method and in the field of research into Old and New Testament, Church History and the History of Dogma made way for startlingly new and unforsakable **in-**

sights, yet-with very few exceptions-did not feel that gave them reason to turn their backs on the business of theology proper.

But let us first leave out of account for the moment the effects of the critical historical method in the realm of theology. In the so-called secular realm, too, there came with the beginning of the modern age a tremendous upsurge of historical science, which, if at first variously hampered by the Enlightenment and by Idealism, presently came in the nineteenth century to dominate intellectual life. On the one hand it brought lasting achievements in the illumination of the past, yet on the other hand there arose unmistakable dangers in this process of **historization**. If at first the danger was more that of doing violence to history, whether by failing to maintain the necessary measure of self-criticism and making hasty judgments according to the limited standards of the present, or by venturing to systematize the course of history in ruthless disregard of the historically unique and contingent, or by heroification and glorification of particular epochs of the past, yet it was not long before the tables were turned and the present was in danger of being violated by history. The historian of the late nineteenth century, in which this development reached its peak, dragged all norms and values into a boundless relativism that made manifest the serious crisis into which the modern mind had found its way. It would be an illusion to hold that this crisis with its characteristic historicism has been overcome. For all the many anti-historical reactions that have appeared are unserviceable attempts to settle the problem it has brought. Nevertheless, especially since Dilthey's **labours** on the problem of the understanding of history, and as a direct result of them, new and promising ways have been adopted to ward off the danger of historicism without surrendering the stringency of the critical historical method and evading the tasks it prescribes. The view has gained ground that a purely objective attitude to history, which takes the methods of natural science as its ideal and is content to establish how things once were, simply does not do justice to the task of understanding history and is also feasible only within very definite limits-that history then has nothing at all to say to us and the result is only an amassing of dead material instead of a living, personal encounter with history.

In this situation it would, of course, be disastrous in the extreme if that were to give rise to a bifocal concern with history-if on the one hand professional historical science were to restrict itself to a formal, technical use of the critical historical method, while on the other hand attempts were made, quite apart from strictly methodical study of that

kind, to explain the **meaning** of historic events **and bring** them vividly to life. Rather, everything depends on the critical historical method **being** freed from this mistaken curtailment to a mere technical tool and **being** understood **in** such a way as to include in itself the whole of the hermeneutic process. That does not imply the slightest prejudice to the stringent methods of historical research and their technical application. **On** the contrary, the very process of **taking** the historical source **in** all its **historicity** (and that **means** in its distance from the present) **and** making it luminous by **means** of a critical examination that penetrates to the uttermost limits of its explicability, and thereby at the same time also critically correcting the prejudices of the expositor himself and **making** clear to him the historical conditionedness of his **own preconceptions**—that very process creates the necessary basis for a genuine encounter with the text, **and** thereby also for the possibility of having it speak to us. Then the transformation and interpretation of historic events in order to illumine our **own** existence ceases to be arbitrarily **and** naively reading things **into** the source. Rather, the way is now open to genuinely historic, personal encounter and discussion, whereby the interpreter **remains** aware of the fact that the actualization he has achieved is a transformation of the historical—a transformation **in** which the historical distance is constantly kept in view **and** remains a critical corrective of the understanding of history. **And** then **again** it **can** happen, **in** accordance with the well-known principle of the hermeneutic circle, that the **understanding** which achieves the actualization becomes the key to seeing specific matters of historical fact for the first time **in** their **distinctive**ness **and** peculiarity, **and** thus also to applying properly the technical methods of historical research. Modern historical science is unquestionably still a long way from **being** able to take the critical historical method as it here appears in the wide context of the hermeneutic problem **and** provide **in** satisfying categories an exposition of it that is theoretically unobjectionable. For that it depends on the co-operation of philosophy, which **in** its turn **can** make progress on the problem of hermeneutic methods **only in** closest touch with historical science.

4. Theology, too, is affected by the existence of all these still unclarified problems **in** regard to the critical historical method. As historical theology **in** the nineteenth century it passed through the same successes, difficulties **and** dangers as secular historical science. It does not **find** itself the happy possessor of its **own**, specifically theological method of fulfilling the hermeneutic task. So far as it has to do with the understanding of history, it **knows** no difference at all **in** its method

from the tasks that are prescribed to so-called secular historical science. It has no expository method of its **own** at its disposal-no 'spiritual' method, or whatever it may be called-that **differs** as a method from the way **in** which, say, a text of Plato is to be interpreted. In regard to the tasks and problems of the critical historical method theology has therefore **in** actual fact no option but to take its place along with historical science **and** philosophy **in** what is essentially the same struggle to discover the nature and correct employment of the critical historical method. **Only in** one respect, it is true, is theology **in** a special case: **in** so far as it is doubly **affected** by the problems that here arise-first **in** the general form of how genuine knowledge **and** understanding of history is possible, but then also on the particular **point** of what the consequences of the modern attitude to history are for matters so closely related to history **and bound** up with history as the proclamation **and** teaching of the church. Is there not a danger that with the emancipation of the critical historical method the very substance of theology, the revelation **in** history, will come to be destroyed? It would imply failure to grasp the theological situation in which we find ourselves if I were to try **in** what follows to provide solutions for the whole vast array of problems whose treatment is precisely the onerous task this Journal seeks to serve. I **can** therefore **only** try to provide a few pointers to indicate the nature of the problems.

(a) I have already pointed out that here Catholicism **and** Protestantism are radically opposed. One need **only** observe the way Roman Catholicism has concentrated **and** consolidated its theological forces **since** the **beginning** of the nineteenth century-its uncompromising attitude of opposition to the spirit of the times **and** its transition from the defensive to the offensive both inwardly **and** outwardly-in order to **find** it a sore trial how very different is the picture of church **and** theology presented by modern Protestantism: countless splits **in** all directions, progressive dissolution not **only** of its **unity** but also of its dogmatic substance, such infection by modern thought as apparently leads to internal sepsis, and where the attempt is made to defend or re-vitalize the old, the unseasonable, the distinctive and indispensable, there we find a defensive attitude towards the outside opponent that savours of anxiety, grimness or despair, while the courage, indeed the sheer brazen audacity of which modern Protestantism has certainly no lack is devoted to ever new onslaughts of criticism within the camp and is more inexorable than the enemies of Christianity in ruthlessly questioning the foundations of the Protestant Church and of its theology.

It is a decision of fundamental importance what attitude we take to this, what judgment we pass on the respective paths of Catholicism and Protestantism today. Are we to look enviously and longingly towards Catholicism and say: there the Christian cause has been championed more purely and decisively, and better maintained? Must we be ashamed of the history of modern Protestantism and confess: here the cause of Christianity has been betrayed, or at the very least men have been carelessly playing with fire? And must the conclusion be: what Protestantism in the nineteenth century failed to do and what, if there is anything at all still to be salvaged, must now be made good as quickly and thoroughly as possible is, *mutatis mutandis* likewise the preparation of a *Syllabus errorum*, the establishment of a final, absolute doctrinal authority, of an antimodernist oath and of an ecclesiastically authorized standard Thomist theology? Or must we assent to the other possibility—namely, to expose ourselves relentlessly to the vulnerability, the insecurity and the dangers, to refuse to let our ties with the thought of the day be broken, not to wait until criticism comes from an opponent's side and then be the more inflexible in rejecting all criticism, but to go ahead with the critical examination of our foundations, to let everything burn that will burn and without reservations await what proves itself unburnable, genuine, true—and to adopt this attitude at the risk that much that seemed established may begin to rock, that indeed some things may even be temporarily considered shaky which upon ever new examination then prove to be stable after all, that thus many mistakes and errors are made, much asserted and much taken back again, that our path takes us through serious crises, bitter struggles, bewildering debates and the results are apparently weakness and collapse? And to increase the difficulty of the decision that faces us here: it is not by any means as if Catholicism in all this had become a dead, stagnant pool, whereas Protestantism had provided proof that it alone has power and life and a future. If we sought to judge by outward success, then the history of the modern age has surely rather justified Catholicism. The fact is, that through the developments of modern times the opposition between Catholicism and Protestantism has become a degree sharper, that to the old confessional distinctions of the sixteenth century there has been added still another new element of separation, whose basis was of course already given in the Reformation itself—namely, a fundamentally different attitude to the spirit of the modern age.

Not as if the position of Protestantism in this respect were a wholly unified one. It is no wonder that the decisive question which has arisen

has taken root within Protestantism itself and now the two tendencies struggle together within it: either to take a path that runs at least parallel to that of Catholicism—in other words, the path of restoration, of concentration and of remaining as immune from the modern spirit as possible—or to assent to the path to which Protestantism has been led by an inner necessity, i.e. the path into vulnerability, into the fires of criticism. And it is likewise no wonder that between these two extremes there has arisen an abundance of attempts at mediation. But whatever position we may adopt, the simple fact has emerged that Protestantism of any shade is completely unable to evade the emancipation of historical criticism which distinguishes it from Catholicism,¹ that it

¹ In view of the more recent and the latest papal pronouncements on the problem of hermeneutics, it could certainly be asked whether and how far the problem of the critical historical method still stands to divide the confessions. If we consider only the notorious decisions of the papal Bible Commission in the heyday of the struggle against modernism under Pius X, then more especially the encyclical *Divino afflante spiritu* of 1943 (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 35 [1943], 297-325—the most important parts of it are in Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, editio 26, Freiburg 1947, No. 2292/4) and the new 1945 translation of the Psalms with its independence of the Vulgate and its downright revolutionary flavour (cf. *TLZ* 73 [1948], 203-208) make it appear as if Catholicism had undergone a thoroughgoing change of heart in regard to hermeneutics. And indeed it is in fact surprising how far the Roman Church goes to meet the demands of historical exegesis and actually draws the logical conclusion of supplanting the Vulgate even in liturgical use by newer translations.

That in expounding scripture a certain amount of weight must be given to the original Hebrew and Greek text alongside the Vulgate, had of course never been denied in theory. The assertion of the *Tridentinum*, '*ut haec ipsa vetus et vulgata editio, quae longo tot saeculorum usu in ipsa Ecclesia probata est, in publicis lectionibus, disputationibus, praedicationibus et expositionibus pro authentica habeatur, et quod nemo illam reicere quovis praetextu audeat vel praesumat*' (Denz. 785), could not indeed be otherwise understood than in the sense of a dogmatic authenticity of the Vulgate text. That however means: in the case of a conflict with the original text, the Vulgate text was in practice recognized as the exegetical norm. Even when Leo XIII in 1893 in the Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* described the knowledge of the original languages as necessary for a philologically unobjectionable Bible exegesis, he was still of the same opinion as always: that the primary meaning of the Hebrew and Greek original is well apparent from the Vulgate, and the original text has only to be referred to in case of doubt (Denz. 1941).

Yet the above-mentioned Encyclical of Pius XII, *Divino afflante spiritu*, goes beyond that. If it seeks to escape the noose of the *Tridentinum* by saying that the authenticity of the Vulgate there asserted is not really understood in a critical, but in a juridical sense, yet this distinction is of no importance as long as the dogmatic authenticity of the Vulgate is maintained ('... *quo quidem usu demonstratur eamdem, prout intellexit et intelligit Ecclesia, in rebus fidei ac morum ab omni prorsus esse errore immunem; ita ut, ipsa Ecclesia testante et confirmante, in disputationibus, lectionibus concionibusque tuto ac sine errandi periculo proferri possit* ...' *Act. Ap. Sed.* 35, 309, Denz. 2292). This interpretation of the

cannot take the road via *Syllabus errorum*, infallible authority on doctrine, anti-modernist oath and standard church theology, and that the only question is how the task of criticism is to be properly carried out

Tridentinum, it is true, deviates quite plainly from its original meaning, in that what Trent declared in the form of a strict order regarding the use of the Vulgate, is weakened by Pius XII into a mere possibility (*possit!*)—whereby, however, the appearance of a contradiction is avoided by explicitly maintaining the infallibility of the Vulgate *in rebus fidei ac morum*. And yet the loosening of the attitude to the Vulgate heralds a greater freedom in the use of historical methods of exposition. That comes to expression in the following way of formulating the guiding principle of hermeneutics: '*Linguarum antiquarum cognitione et criticae artis subsidiis egregie instructus, exegeta catholicus ad illud accedat munus, quod ex omnibus ei impositis summum est, ut nempe germanam ipsam Sacrorum Librorum sententiam reperiat atque exponat. Quo in opere exsequendo ante oculos habeant interpretes sibi illud omnium maximum curandum esse, ut clare dispiciant ac definiant, quis sit verborum biblicorum sensus, quem litteralem vocant. Hanc litteralem verborum significationem omni cum diligentia per linguarum cognitionem iidem eruant, ope adhibita contextus, comparationisque cum assimilabilibus locis; quae quidem omnia in profanorum quoque scriptorum interpretatione in auxilium vocari solent, ut auctoris mens luculenter patescat*' (Act. Ap. Sed. 35, 310, Denz. 2293).

The means of discovering this sensus *litteralis* are further expounded in hermeneutic rules of the most noteworthy kind. As *summa interpretandi norma* is laid down the task of ascertaining what the author intended to say. That, however, involves above all paying attention to the historical distance, whose result is, particularly with writings which appeared in the Orient many centuries ago, that they arose under literary laws completely different from those we are accustomed to today. Consequently special value has to be assigned to research into literary types. Only then shall we begin to understand much that to us today appears offensive or even erroneous, yet when historically treated reveals itself as only a time-conditioned manner of speaking. In such accommodation to the language of a particular day we can see at once the condescension of God, exactly parallel to the incarnation of the Word of God. For that reason careful exegesis involves not only grammatical and philological, but also historical, archaeological and ethnological examination. That of course is not meant to imply any alteration in the basic principles of Catholic hermeneutics. Bible exegetes must at the same time bear in mind that here they have to do with the divinely inspired Word, and must therefore pay no less attention to the elucidations and explanations of the church's teaching office and the fathers, and thereby to the viewpoint of the *analogia fidei*. They must therefore beware of the mistake of many commentaries—namely, of confining themselves to philological, historical or archaeological explanations. The exposition should rather aim above all at bringing out the theological content. That is the only way to silence those who complain that the biblical commentaries offer nothing that contributes to edification, and who therefore have recourse to some kind of spiritual or mystical interpretation. The emphasis on the *sensus litteralis* is not indeed meant to rule out entirely the recognition of a sensus *spiritualis*. But such a meaning exists only where God as the Author of holy scripture intended it and where we have plain evidence of that intention in scripture itself. The sensus *spiritualis* must therefore be applied with all due care and reserve.

We cannot too strongly recommend anyone who wishes to go further into the hermeneutic problem to make a thorough study of this latest official Catholic

and what the result of it proves to be. Without making light of the **difficulties** that here arise, it must nevertheless be said that Protestantism has decided in principle for the critical historical method and **there-**

pronouncement on the question of scripture exposition. There is much truth in it which one could only wish every Protestant theologian would also take to heart. It is certainly not to the glory of Protestantism today that in comparison with much that can be heard **from** the Protestant side on these questions, the pope's pronouncement appears decidedly progressive from the scientific point of view, and that the opinion of at least the average Protestant theologian on the question of the critical historical method essentially coincides with the attitude adopted in the Encyclical and it therefore suddenly causes some embarrassment to determine correctly the point at which the Catholic and Protestant views of the hermeneutic problem part company. Compare only the main points:-On both sides recognition of historical, archaeological and philological methods as means of assisting towards exegesis, yet only within the **limits** of apologetic purposes and under appeal to the not yet clearly and methodically thought-out viewpoint of the *analogia fidei*. But also on both sides a certain surfeit of 'merely' historical commentaries and therefore an insistence on theological exegesis, on exegetical work that can be turned to practical account. On both sides the danger of slipping into uncontrollable spiritual exegesis and, even where that danger is recognized, no escaping from the dualism between merely historical and properly theological exposition. What actually is the real significance of critical historical exposition, in so far as it is not merely something that can be made serviceable for apologetic purposes, remains on both sides unexplained. On both sides there has been precious little penetration of the real hermeneutic problem, in spite of the apparently progressive acceptance of historical exegesis as an auxiliary discipline that simply happens to be necessary and in certain respects useful. On both sides the standpoint is fundamentally the rather harmless one of a supra-naturalism such as was already adopted in Protestant theology about **150** years ago in **defence** against, but also in partial accommodation to, the problems presented to theology by modern historical thinking.

It is necessary to bring out these points so sharply because there is a danger that in face of the modern Catholic view of the method of scripture exposition, Protestant theology should feel itself suddenly disarmed because it has no longer to do with the crasser form of antimodernism but with the Catholic counterpart of its own average outlook. Only a Protestant theology which, in face of Catholic exegesis and the way it is bound to the norm of tradition, has better weapons than merely an exegesis that is also bound to tradition, albeit the tradition of the Reformers-hence only a Protestant theology which takes seriously the full weight of the hermeneutic problem, and does not rest content with a dualism in exegesis but thinks through the question of the critical historical method in such a way that that method itself becomes identical with so-called theological exegesis -only a Protestant theology of that kind will recognize that agreement between the confessions on the subject of scripture exposition has at bottom not been brought a single step nearer even by the seemingly so amazing Encyclical of **1943**. The debate has only become vastly more difficult. And as Protestants we can only be thankful for that. It could be asked why the Roman Church is now able to be so magnanimous both in regard to the text of the Vulgate and also in regard to the problems of historical exposition of scripture. The reason is undoubtedly that she is so sure of her position, resting as it does on the power of **tradition**—ultimately, too, a tradition which is present in the pope himself—that she no

with for the dangerous path just described. And in that it has made the right decision. Indeed, I venture to assert that the Protestantism of the nineteenth century, by deciding in principle for the critical historical method, maintained and confirmed over against Roman Catholicism in a different situation the decision of the Reformers in the sixteenth century. That of course is not to say that wherever in the history of modern Protestant theology the motto of the critical historical method has been most loudly proclaimed and most radically applied, there men have also really been nearest to the Reformation in every respect. But what it certainly does mean is, that wherever they made way for the critical historical method and, however grievous their errors, took it seriously as their task, there, if certainly often in a very paradoxical way, they were really asserting the fundamental principle of the Reformers in the intellectual situation of the modern age.

(b) The proof that must be provided for the assertion that assent to the critical historical method has essentially a deep inner connexion with the Reformers' doctrine of justification leads to far-reaching questions in historical and systematic theology. To expound it fully will still require many detailed examinations of individual aspects of the theology of the Reformation and the history of modern Protestant theology. To that end a resumption and continuation of the work of Dilthey and Troeltsch on the historic relation between the Reformation and the rise of the modern spirit is urgently needed. The historical facts are, as far as the directly demonstrable historical connexions are concerned, manifestly very complicated. If the Reformation is taken as a historic whole,

longer feels she has any serious danger to fear from the side of critical historical exposition of scripture, at least within the limits in which she allows it. Inasmuch as the absolute authority of the church is assured, it is possible to give more latitude to scripture exposition. The extreme intensifying of the church's authority has the remarkable, but not incomprehensible, result of permitting a certain extension of freedom within the church. To put any other interpretation on the latest pronouncements on this point would to my mind be an illusion. I can perceive in them no trace of an indication that the Roman Church has any inclination to turn aside from the path whose direction is unequivocally laid down by the Tridentine and Vatican Decrees. Any individual concessions that may be made to the critical historical method are therefore based on a premise which from the start takes the critical sting out of the hermeneutic problem, viz. —*ut in rebus jidei ac morum ad aedificationem doctrinae christianae pertinentium is Pro vero sensu sacrae Scripturae habendus sit, quem tenuit ac tenet sancta mater Ecclesia, cuius est iudicare de vero sensu et interpretatione Scripturarum sanctarum; atque ideo nemini licere contra hunc sensum aut etiam contra unanimum consensum Patrum ipsam Scripturam sacram interpretari (Vaticanum, Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica, cap. 2, Denz. 1788).*

then there will certainly again and again be facts to notice that dialectically balance each other. The Reformation had both an extraordinarily revolutionary effect on the course of thought, and on the other hand was undoubtedly also a strongly retarding factor in the general intellectual transition from the Middle Ages to modern times. Yet not only its positive, but also its critical relations with the humanism which more especially paved the way for the modern age must be taken into account as well in assessing the inner connexions that exist between the Reformation and the rise of modern historical thinking. And it could be asked how far it is not precisely a result of the Reformation heritage when the historical thinking of modern times, after a phase of rather strong dependence on the objectivistic thinking of humanism, goes on to a comprehensive solution of the hermeneutic problem from the standpoint of a critical historical method that is understood far more deeply than in merely technical ways.

However, operating with the Reformation as a historical whole will certainly not in itself enable us to solve the problem in question. Only critical reflexion on the decisive basic principle from which the Reformers set out can help us to perceive whether and in what way there exist in the complex dynamic field of the Reformation as a whole definite essential inner connexions with the critical historical method of modern times. That they do exist should already be clear from the above arguments, which have demonstrated all along the line the hermeneutic relevance of the Reformers' theology as contrasted with the Catholic position. The *sola fide* of the Reformation doctrine of justification both contains a rejection of any existing ways of ensuring present actualization, whether ontological, sacramental or hierarchical, and also positively includes an understanding of actualization in the sense of genuinely historic, personal encounter. If this encounter with the historic revelation takes place solely in hearing the Word, then the shattering of all historical assurances that supposedly render the decision of **faith** superfluous is completely in line with the struggle against the saving significance of good works or against understanding the working of the sacrament in the sense of the opus *operatum*. The *sola fide* destroys all secretly docetic views of revelation which evade the **historicalness** of revelation by making it a history *sui generis*, a sacred area from which the critical historical method must be anxiously debarred. In the Reformers' view, both revelation and faith are discovered in their genuine **historicalness**, and that quite definitely means that faith is exposed to all the vulnerability and ambiguity of the historical. Only in that way and only

for that reason can genuine encounter with the historic revelation be attained in faith and only in faith.

As everywhere in Reformation theology, so also here in regard to the relation to history, the assent to lack of guarantees is merely the reverse side of the certainty of salvation *sola fide*. And thus we are justified in asking whether a theology which evades the claims of the critical historical method has still any idea at all of the genuine meaning of the Reformers' doctrine of justification, even when the formulae of the sixteenth century are repeated with the utmost correctness. The objection that of course at the time of the Reformation and in early Protestant Orthodoxy the Reformers' doctrine of justification was presented and maintained without knowledge of the critical historical method, merely betrays the basic error of a traditionalism that believes itself relieved by the Reformers' theology from responsible theological labour of its own. On closer inspection, however, it is plain that alongside the fundamental relation between the Reformers' doctrine of justification and the critical historical method, the theology of the Reformation itself also broached an abundance of problems involving content with which the critical historical method has to do. One need only think of the at least latent criticism to which the Greek categories of thought in early church dogma were subjected, or the quite obvious internal criticism of content applied to the interpretation of the New Testament. The heritage of the Reformation with its obligations would be poorly preserved if the attempt were made to shirk the same problems as soon as they are posed anew—admittedly in the sharper form of historical reflexion—by the critical historical method. Precisely for the sake of keeping the heritage of the Reformation intact, we shall have to come to grips with many problems that are already heralded in the Reformers' theology itself, and to set about them, as befits the changed intellectual situation, by new and different methods from what were used at the Reformation.

(c) But now, in spite of the emphasis on the essential inner connexion between the Reformers' doctrine of justification and the critical historical method, there can of course be no denying the fact that the evolution of modern Protestant theology is full of unsolved difficulties. And these must be borne in mind if the call to adopt the critical historical method is not to be misunderstood as involving uncritical acceptance of all the painful errors manifested by the history of Neo-Protestant theology, but is rather to be understood as a demand for critical discussion of the history of Protestant theology in the sense of duly measuring it against the basic principles of the Reformers. The chief theological

difficulty, which every effort must be made to overcome, is the fatal isolation of the historical disciplines from systematic theology and from the life of the church. For the historical disciplines much will here depend on whether work is continued not only on fearless pursuit of individual researches committed solely to the discovery of truth, but also on the hermeneutic problem by which the historical disciplines are drawn into the wider context of theological work as a whole. It is vital to clarify the manner in which what was above called genuinely historic, personal encounter with the text takes effect in the realm of theological study of the Old and New Testaments and of Church History and the History of Theology in ways that can be methodically grasped—in other words, to clarify the theological relevance of critical historical work on these texts and events. This is a most vital task, both that we may avoid the caricature of a research that is content with discussing minute matters of detail and also that we may escape the false path of a **pseudo-**theological exposition that spares itself all the trouble of detailed historical examination and makes the text a springboard for its own thoughts. We shall therefore have to strive to secure recognition of the theological bearing of historical work, not by by-passing critical historical examination nor in disconnected supplementation of it, but through the very act of carrying it out.

Whether and how far it is possible to fix general norms for setting limits to the improper employment of the critical historical method in the realm of theology, is a question that assuredly requires very careful consideration. Yet at the same time we must here primarily bear in mind the fact that unceasing critical self-correction belongs to the nature of the critical historical method, so that precisely with questions of historical criticism an over-hasty censorship of doctrine is most readily liable to cause only the greater harm by limiting freedom in matters of teaching and research and thereby cutting off the possibility of genuine critical self-correction. When we survey the course of historical theology in the nineteenth century, then we must realize what a decisive share the critical historical method had not so much in producing as rather in overcoming dogmatic aberrations in the Enlightenment, Idealism, Romanticism and Liberalism. Instead of everything succumbing step by step to dissolution at the hands of the critics, as was feared, the critical historical method actually taught a new regard for facts to which the dominant theology was paying no attention at all. One need only think, say, of the extraordinary theological significance of the **eschato-**logical view of the preaching of Jesus, or the stimulus that came from

the questions raised by the religious-historical or form-critical methods.

The task of even beginning to explore on any wide scale the real **theological relevance** of the tremendous work of critical historical theology **in the nineteenth century** is one **in** which nineteenth-century theology **undoubtedly** failed and which now, in the general antipathy towards the **nineteenth century**, threatens to be entirely forgotten. Systematic theology must therefore be required not **only** to respect the results of critical historical research—even on that **point** there is still much to be desired—**but also** to take up fully **and** completely **into its own** approach the outlook **of the** critical historical method. The trouble is—and it is **plainly** manifest in the history of modern theology—that Protestant dogmatics **since the days of the Enlightenment** has not succeeded **in** really squaring up to this task. It is not historical, but systematic theology that makes plain the crisis which has arisen in Protestant theology. To be sure, critical historical theology has also contributed to it in manifold ways. Yet the primary source of the trouble has not at all been its coming, as it often enough did and does, to mistaken conclusions in what are really uncritical ways. The trouble has been above all that its champions have either supposed that systematic theology could and must be abolished altogether, or else considered themselves in a position to produce a doctrine of the Christian Faith as a direct result of their critical historical **labours**, whether in the form of reducing everything to the life and teaching of Jesus or of progressively bringing to light the advances that have taken place in the history of church and theology itself. The fact that it is precisely in systematic theology that the problems arise with such sharpness points to a real aporia on the part of Protestantism. It will at all events be unable, if it rightly understands its own nature, to develop a dogmatics that is structurally identical with Catholic dogmatics. Yet what the shape of Protestant dogmatics should be and what method it should go by is still an entirely open question—one which **Schleiermacher** certainly perceived with a clarity hardly ever to be attained again later, even if he, too, failed to solve it. If systematic theology takes up into its own approach the whole outlook of the critical historical method, then the result will be not only that it will achieve the critical destruction of all supposed assurances, but above all that it will be kept strictly to its proper concern—namely, the historic revelation in Jesus **Christ**—in full awareness of the historicalness of its own systematic theological **labours**.

And **finally**, the proclamation of the church—and the form of church order is also closely connected with that—must be required to take the

work of historical criticism seriously. It is a real question whether the widespread frightful lameness and staleness of the church's message, her powerlessness to speak to the men of today, and likewise the lack of credibility that attaches to the church as such are not very largely connected with its fear of letting the work of critical historical theology bear fruit in the proper way and its failure to take sufficient account of the nature of the hermeneutic problem, which is acutely concentrated in the act of preaching. For critical historical theology is not identical with liberal theology. It is, however, the indispensable means of reminding the church of the freedom rooted in the *iustificatio impii*.

(d) We turn again in conclusion to the situation of today. The period since the first World War is marked by a movement of concentration in church and theology, introduced by new theological reflexion on the heart of the Christian kerygma and strengthened by the period of testing in the church struggle—a movement of concentration which found confessional expression in the Theological Declaration of Barmen. Something has happened there which no one can go back on and presumably only few wish to go back on either. But precisely when we know ourselves committed to what has happened, the commitment will have to consist in resolutely combatting the partly manifest and partly veiled dangers it immediately brings: we are committed not to a reactionary movement of opposition, but to watchful concern for the purity of the Gospel message. The dangers of a movement of concentration are by its very nature those of one-sidedness, foreshortening and isolation, of striving for security and impregnability, of seeking to avoid conflict and testing. To trace out these dangers concretely in detail would require a carefully differentiated analysis of the theological and ecclesiastical forces involved, extraordinarily different and conflicting as they were in spite of their common participation in the movement of concentration. Yet certain main tendencies stand out in various degrees: a new theological dogmatism and traditionalistic **confessionalism**, a clericalism and sacramentalism, an over-simplification through insistence on pietistic edification or else through catchword theology, radicalism, confessional rhetoric, etc. The critical historical method is certainly recognized in principle, except by a few outsiders. But in practice it is widely felt in ecclesiastical and theological circles to be really a tedious nuisance. Its results may perhaps be noted, but then they are left aside after all instead of being worked through. And where the critical historical method is seriously applied today, it remains a matter for the individual historical disciplines, and does not have an effect on theology as a whole, still less

on the church-or when there is any visible sign of consequences of such a kind, it is pronounced to be rationalism and liberalism, or even rouses the cry of heresy. The path which theology has to tread in this situation for the church's sake is certainly full of unsolved problems, but there is no doubt as to the direction it must take.